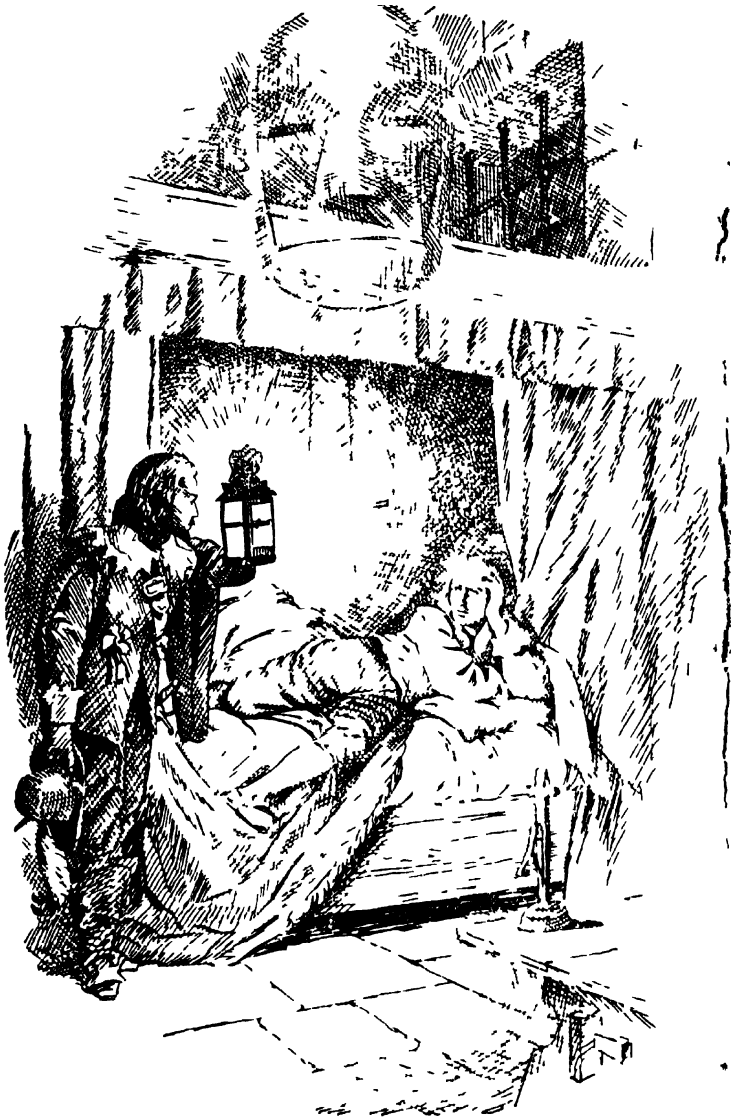
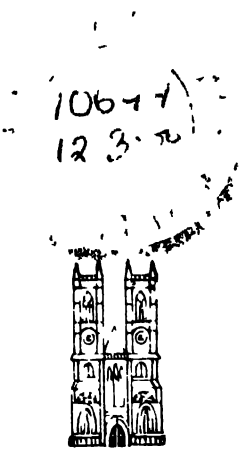


THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

by

ALEXANDRE DUMAS



MURRAYS ABBEY CLASSICS
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THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK deals with one of the greatest historical mysteries of France. Never has Dumas' wonderful imagination, inexhaustible fecundity, unique facility been applied more successfully than to the mystery of the masked prisoner of Louis XIV whose identity remains to this day a debatable problem

Was he an illegitimate son of the king's? Was he his bastard brother? Was he a twin of Louis XIV? Whatever one decides the most famous of all solutions presented freshly in this new and skilfully edited version of Dumas' masterpiece cannot but delight every reader who loves a swift romance set in a fascinating period of European history.

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

CHAPTER I

Madame de Chevreuse opened the door of her garden and hurried towards the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, where M. Colbert resided. A valet received the duchess under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb Monsieur Colbert's important occupations. But Madame de Chevreuse, without feeling or appearing to be annoyed, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets, folded the paper in a manner peculiarly her own, and handed it to the fellow with so haughty and imperious a gesture that he, well-accustomed to judge people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert's room.

The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchess to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place, in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who, with his own hands, held both the folding doors open.

"What is the subject, madame, which procures me the honour of a visit from you?" he inquired.

Madame de Chevreuse seated herself in the arm-chair which M. Colbert advanced towards her.

"Monsieur Colbert, you are the intendant of finances, and are ambitious of becoming the surintendant?"

"Madame!"

"Do not deny it; you would only prolong the conversation. It is quite useless."

"Nevertheless, madame, much as I may desire to show goodwill and courtesy to a lady of your merit, nothing will induce me to admit that I wish to supplant my superior."

"I said nothing of supplanting, M. Colbert. I merely say that you aspire to replace M. Fouquet."

"Madame, I assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet."

"Again a word too much; it is very evident since you have not succeeded in having M. Fouquet dismissed, that you have not the power to do so, and I should be a fool indeed if I had come to you without bringing the very thing you lack."

"I am distressed at being obliged to insist," said M. Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchess to sound the very depths of his duplicity; "but I n ust warn you that for the last six years denunciation upon denunciation has been brought against M. Fouquet without shaking him in the slightest degree."

"There is a time for everything, M. Colbert. Those who brought these denunciations were not named Madame de Chevreuse, and did not bring such proofs against him as six letters from M. de Mazarin, making his offence plain."

"His offence?"

"His crime, if you like better."

"A crime——?"

"I am enchanted that the word produces such an effect on you."

"It is a word, madame, that involves many things."

"Yes, it involves among other things the post of superintendent of finance for you, and a sentence of exile or the Bastille for M. Fouquet."

"But the opportunity must be a good one."

"It is fairly good, in truth. I reckon it to be worth five hundred thousand livres."

"How mean you?" asked Colbert.

"I mean, monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my hands, I will deliver it into yours only for the sum of five hundred thousand livres."

"Very good, madame, I understand. But since you have fixed your price, let us look at the value of the merchandise."

"Oh, a mere trifle: six letters, as I told you, from M. de Mazarin; autographs which will surely not be too dear, if they furnish undeniable proof that M. Fouquet has misappropriated large sums from the treasury."

"Undeniable proof?" exclaimed Colbert, with sparkling eyes.

"Undeniable! Will you read the letters?"

"With all my heart!—a copy, without doubt?"

"Most certainly a copy"; and so speaking, the duchess drew from her bosom a little packet flattened by her velvet bodice.

"Read!" she said.

Colbert fell eagerly upon the papers and devoured them.

"Excellent!" he cried.

"It is clear, is it not?"

"Yes, madame, yes! M. de Mazarin delivered certain sums to M. Fouquet, who misappropriated this money. But the question remains: What sums were they?"

"Ah, there it is! what sums? But if we conclude a bargain, I will add to these letters a seventh, giving you the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A needless question. It is as if I were to ask you, M. Colbert, whether the money-bags I am to receive from you will be full or empty."

"Very well, madame."

"How much, then, do you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand livres."

The duchess laughed in his face, then suddenly: "Wait," cried she.

"You consent?"

"Not yet. I have thought of another combination. You shall give me three hundred thousand livres——"

"What then?"

"You know how tenderly I have always loved the Queen. I wish to have an interview with her Majesty."

"With the Queen?"

"Yes, M. Colbert, with the Queen, who is no longer my friend, it is true; who long ago ceased to be so, but who may become my friend once more, if the occasion arises."

"Her Majesty no longer receives any one, madame. She suffers greatly. You must be aware that the attacks of her malady have become more frequent."

"It is precisely for that reason that I desire an interview with her Majesty. You must know that in Flanders we have many cases of that disease."

"What! Of cancer, that frightful, incurable malady?"

"Not incurable, M. Colbert. The Béguines of Bruges are admirable doctors for all sorts of maladies. They have various precious waters and specifics. I shall, therefore, take the Queen some of this blessed water from the Bruges nunnery. Her Majesty will recover. You see, M. Colbert, that to prevent my visiting the Queen would be almost committing regicide."

And rising to her feet with this decisive utterance, the old duchess left M. Colbert in a disagreeable state of perplexity. To bargain further had become impossible; to let the bargain drop would involve infinite loss.

"Madame," he said, "I am about to have the pleasure of handing you a hundred thousand crowns."

"Oh!" exclaimed the duchess.

"But how shall I obtain possession of the original letters?"

"In the simplest possible way, my dear M. Colbert. Whom do you trust?"

The grave financier began to smile without speaking, in a way that set his great black eyebrows rising and falling like the wings of a bat against the deep furrows of his sallow forehead.

"No one," he said.

"You overwhelm me! But how, then, shall I receive my hundred thousand crowns?"

The intendant scrawled a few words on a paper, which he handed to the duchess.

"You are paid," said he.

"That is a fine stroke, M. Colbert, and I am about to reward you." As she spoke these words she began to laugh. Madame de Chevreuse's laugh was a sinister murmur. The duchess proceeded to open the front of her bodice, and drew from her breast another small packet of papers tied with a flame-coloured ribbon. Still laughing, she handed it to the superintendent, who stared aghast at these strange preliminaries.

"There," she said, "are the original letters of M. de Mazarin. You have them, M. Colbert. And now," she added, hastily refastening her bodice, "your fortune is achieved. You can accompany me to the Queen."

"Not at all, madame. If you were to incur anew the displeasure of her Majesty, and they should learn at the Palais-Royal that I had introduced you, the Queen would never forgive me. No. I have people at the palace devoted to me. They shall admit you without compromising me."

"Pardon me! pardon me! I do not wish to run the risk of being refused admittance."

"That is your affair, madame. I shall order the first valet de chambre of the Queen's gentleman-in-waiting to admit a Béguine bringing a sovereign remedy for her Majesty's sufferings. You will carry my letter, and you will take charge of the remedies, and furnish all explanations. I acknowledge the Béguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse."

"I care little for that."

"Here is your letter of introduction, madame."

Colbert handed the letter to the duchess, and gently drew away the chair by which she was standing. Madame de Chevreuse bowed very slightly, and left the room.

Colbert, who had recognised Mazarin's hand and had counted the letters, rang for his secretary and ordered him to go at once in search of M. Vanel, counsellor of parliament. The secretary replied that the counsellor, according to his usual custom, had just come in to give M. Colbert an account of the day's session.

Colbert approached the lamp and re-read the letters of the late cardinal, smiling repeatedly as he recognised the importance of the papers which Madame de Chevreuse had delivered to him. Then, with his great head propped on his hands, he gave himself up for a few moments to profound reflection. Meanwhile, a tall man with a lean face, a hooked nose, and a fixed gaze, had entered Colbert's cabinet with a modest assurance which revealed a character at once supple and firm—supple towards the master who could fling him his prey, firm towards the dogs who might attempt to dispute the spoils with him. M. Vanel carried under his arm a voluminous bundle of documents which he laid upon the table where Colbert was leaning.

"Good-day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good-day, monseigneur," replied Vanel, simply.

"Vanel," suddenly said the protector to the protégé, "you are an industrious man."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"You are highly esteemed in parliament, Vanel?"

"I believe so, monseigneur."

"You ought not to stagnate in the post of counsellor."

"How can I do otherwise?"

"By purchasing a place."

"Small purses, monseigneur, are the hardest to fill. And, moreover, what vacant place is there?"

"I know of none, it is true. And yet there is one, but only the King could buy it without becoming straitened; and the King, I venture to say, will not seek to buy the post of procureur-général."

On hearing these words Vanel turned his humble, spiritless glance upon Colbert, and in vain did the minister ask himself whether this man had divined his meaning.

"Why do you speak to me, monseigneur, of the post of procureur-général? I know of no such post, except the one occupied by M. Fouquet."

"Precisely, my dear counsellor."

"You are not squeamish, monseigneur," said Vanel; "but before merchandise can be bought it must be for sale."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's office might cost dear. How much would you give for it, M. Vanel?"

"All that I possess, monseigneur."

"And what might that be?"

"Between three and four hundred thousand livres."

"And the post is worth?"

"A million and a half at the lowest. I know people who have offered seventeen hundred thousand livres without moving M. Fouquet. If it chanced that M. Fouquet actually wished to sell, which I doubt in spite of all that I have heard——"

"Ah! you have heard it, then? From whom?"

"From M. Gourville—M. Pélisson—mere rumours!"

"Very good. If M. Fouquet should wish to sell, then?"

"Even in that case I could not buy, seeing that the superintendent will sell for ready money only, and no one has a million and a half to throw down all at once."

"Do you wish to be procureur-général, Vanel?" said Colbert suddenly, with a softened voice and look.

"I!" exclaimed the other. "I have just had the honour of explaining to monseigneur that my coffers lack at least eleven hundred thousand livres of the price."

"In case of need I will go bail for you."

Vanel rose, greatly stirred by this offer, made so suddenly and unexpectedly by a man whom even the most frivolous were forced to take seriously.

"Do not trifle with me, monseigneur," he said.

"Come! we must act quickly, M. Vanel. You say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post."

"Yes, and M. Pélisson also."

"Very well, M. Vanel, you may go at once to M. Gourville and M. Pélisson; do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?"

"I know M. de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine, the rhymester?"

"The same. He often made verses for my wife when we were friends of M. Fouquet's."

"You can address yourself to him, then, to obtain an interview with the procureur-général?"

"Easily; but the money?"

"At the appointed day and hour you shall have the sum in your possession. Give yourself no concern."

"Monseigneur, such munificence! You eclipse the King; you surpass M. Fouquet himself."

"One moment. Let us not misuse words. I am not giving you fourteen hundred thousand livres, M. Vanel; I have my children to think of."

"Certainly, monseigneur. You are lending them to me; that is enough. Ask whatever security, whatever interest you wish —I am ready to satisfy you. I repeat that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet himself in munificence. What are your conditions?"

"Repayment in eight years."

"Very good."

"A mortgage on the office itself."

"Certainly; is that all?"

"Wait. I reserve to myself the right of redeeming the post at an advance of a hundred and fifty thousand livres, in case you should not fill the office in conformity with the services of the king and my purposes."

"Oh!" exclaimed Vanel, somewhat startled.

"Is there anything in this condition that disturbs you, M. Vanel?" asked Colbert, coldly.

"No, no!" eagerly replied Vanel.

"Then we will sign the pact whenever you please. Hasten to find M. Fouquet's friends."

"I shall hasten to secure his signature."

"Take care that you do nothing of the kind. Never speak of signatures to M. Fouquet, nor of bonds, nor even of pledging his word."

"But what, then, monseigneur?"

"Simply try to have M. Fouquet give you his hand on it. Go!"

CHAPTER II

The Queen mother was in her bedroom at the Palais-Royal with Madame de Motteville and the Señora Molina. When the three ladies had exhausted all the formulas of dissimulation and courtesy before reaching the point of saying that the king's conduct was breaking the hearts of the queen, the queen's mother, and all his relations; when they had fulminated their imprecations, all clothed in the choicest terms, against Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the Queen mother wound up her recriminations with this ejaculation, so expressive of her own character and feelings: "*Estos hijos!*" which means "These children!"—words of deep meaning on a mother's lips—words of terrible meaning on the lips of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, had buried such strange secrets in the depths of her soul.

"Yes," replied Molina, "these children, to whom every mother sacrifices herself."

"To whom," replied the Queen, "a mother sacrifices all."

Madame de Motteville bowed. Suddenly an old woman in the dress worn at the Court of Spain in 1620 drew aside the curtains of the door, and surprised the Queen in tears.

"The remedy! the remedy!" she cried joyfully to the queen, approaching the group without ceremony.

"What remedy, *Chica*?" asked Anne of Austria.

"For your Majesty's malady," she replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Madame de Motteville, hastily; "M Valot?"

"No, a lady from Flanders."

"Who sent her?"

"M. Colbert."

"What is her name?"

"She has not told it."

"Go and see, Molina!" cried the Queen.

"It is needless," suddenly answered a voice, at once firm and gentle, from behind the tapestry hangings—a voice which caused the attendants to start and the Queen to shudder. At the same moment a masked woman appeared between the curtains, and before the Queen had time to speak: "I am a nun from the Béguinage of Bruges," said the unknown, "and I am indeed the bearer of a remedy that will cure your Majesty."

All were silent; the Béguine did not advance a step.

"Speak!" said the Queen.

"When we are alone," answered the Béguine.

Anne of Austria glanced at her companions, who at once withdrew; then only did the Béguine advance three steps towards the Queen and bow with deep reverence.

"Your Majesty has friends in Flanders."

"And these friends sent you to me?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Tell me their names."

"It is impossible, Madame, and useless as well since your Majesty's memory is not awakened by your heart."

Anne of Austria raised her head, seeking to discover, under the shade of the mask, and under the mystery of her words, the name of this woman who addressed her with such familiarity and freedom. Then all at once wearied by a curiosity wounding to her pride, she said: "Madame, you cannot be ignorant that it is not the custom to address royal personages with the face masked."

"I am under a vow, Madame, to go to the aid of persons in affliction or suffering, without allowing them even to see my face. I could have given solace both to body and mind,

but since your Majesty forbids it, I go my way. Adieu, Madame, adieu!"

She uttered these words in such tones of harmony and deference as to dispel the Queen's anger and suspicion without lessening her curiosity.

"You are right," she rejoined, "it does not become those who suffer to disdain the consolations Heaven sends them. Speak, Madame, and may you be able, as you have said, to bring solace to my suffering body, for, alas! I fear that God is about to try it cruelly."

"Let us speak first of the soul," said the Béguine, "of the soul, which I feel assured must suffer also."

She had no sooner pronounced these words than the Queen, drawing herself up to her full height, cried in a sharp, imperious tone: "Speak! Explain yourself clearly, speedily, fully, or else——"

"Nay, do not threaten me, Queen," said the Béguine, gently. "I have come to you full of compassion; I have come in the name of a friend."

"Prove this to me, then! Soothe instead of torturing me."

"I will make myself clear. Your Majesty knows that the King was born the 5th of September, 1638, at a quarter after eleven o'clock?"

"Yes," faltered the Queen.

"A half-hour after noon," continued the Béguine, "the dauphin, having been baptised by Monseigneur de Meaux in the presence of the King and in yours, was recognised as heir to the throne of France. The King then proceeded to the chapel of the old château of Saint-Germain to celebrate the *Te Deum.*"

"Very true; but all you are telling me is known to all the world as well as to you and me."

"I am coming, Madame, to something that few persons know,—few, did I say?—alas! I might say two only; for there were but five in all who knew this secret, and for many years past it has been made secure through the death of the chief participators. Our lord the King sleeps with his fathers; the midwife, Péronne, soon followed him; La Porte is already forgotten."

The Queen opened her lips to reply. Beneath the icy hand she raised to her forehead she could feel the drops of burning perspiration.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Béguine. "The King was supping joyously amidst jubilant shouts and full bumpers. At these formidable sounds of popular merriment the dauphin set up a wail in the arms of his nurse, Madame de Hausac,—

he the future King of France; he who upon opening his eyes would find two crowns lying in his cradle. Suddenly your Majesty gave a piercing cry, and Dame Péronne reappeared at the bedside. Dame Péronne gave a cry of amazement, and, taking you in her arms weeping, wild with terror, sent La Porte in haste to summon his Majesty to your chamber. La Porte, as you know, was always cool and self-possessed. He did not approach the King like one who has startling intelligence to give, and conscious of his importance wishes to startle in his turn. He appeared at the King's side with a smile on his lips, and said:

"'Sire, the Queen is full of happiness, but she would be happier still if she could see your Majesty.'

"On that day Louis XIII would have given his crown to the first beggar who cried, 'God save you.' Light-hearted and gay, he rose quickly from the table, saying in the tone that Henry IV might have used: 'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.'

"As he appeared at your Majesty's bedside, Dame Péronne held up to him a second prince, as strong and handsome as the first, saying: 'Sire, God does not will the kingdom of France to descend on the distaff side.' The king, yielding to his first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, crying: 'God be praised!'"

"Merciful Heaven!" moaned the Queen.

"It is known," the Béguine went on eagerly, "that the King, seeing himself the father of two sons of the same age and the same rights, trembled for the safety of France, for the tranquillity of the state. It is known that Cardinal Richelieu, on being summoned, after an hour's meditation in the King's cabinet, finally pronounced this sentence: 'There is a king born to succeed his Majesty, and God has sent another to succeed the first; but at present we need only the first-born. Let us, therefore, hide the second from France, as God has concealed him from his parents themselves. One prince is peace and security to the state; two competitors mean civil war and anarchy.'"

The Queen suddenly rose, pale and with clenched hands.

"You know too much," she said, "since you touch upon affairs of state. As to the friends from whom you hold this secret, they are false and treacherous friends, you are their accomplice in the crime that is now being committed. Off with your mask or I will have you seized by the captain of the guards. Oh, this secret does not terrify me. You have drunk it to your peril! It shall freeze within your breast; neither the secret nor your life henceforth belongs to you."

Anne of Austria, joining a threatening gesture to this menace, took two steps towards the Béguine.

"Learn," said the latter, "to know the fidelity, the discretion, the honour of the friends you have abandoned," and she suddenly raised her mask.

"Madame de Chevreuse!" cried the Queen.

"The only living sharer of your Majesty's secret."

"Oh!" murmured Anne of Austria, "come and embrace me, duchess. Alas! you are killing your friend, when you play thus with her mortal griefs"; and the Queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchess, broke into a storm of bitter tears.

"Madame, you have, indeed, been a mother of sorrows. But besides these august sorrows of which we were just speaking,—we two old friends, parted by the wickedness of man,—apart from these, I say, you have joys, not obvious, it may be, but greatly envied by the world."

The Queen coloured slightly, for she began to understand. "It was cruel," she said, "to cast you off like this."

"Oh, Madame! the King, they say, has inherited the hatred which his father bore me. The King would dismiss me if he knew of my being in the Palais-Royal."

"I do not say that the King is well disposed towards you," replied the Queen, "but I could have—secretly, you know——" The duchess gave a slightly disdainful smile, which disconcerted the Queen. "You did perfectly right to come to me," she added hastily.

"Your Majesty should not have credited the rumour of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal. Do you not perceive that I, your younger sister, as we used to say, am declining towards the tomb?"

"Your Majesty will have sure tidings of the day of my death."

"How is that?"

"Your Majesty will receive on the following day, under double wrappings, all that has escaped destruction of our voluminous correspondence of former days."

"Oh, duchess, speak, speak!"

"It is this note—dated the 2nd of August, 1644—in which you request me to go to Noisy-le-Sec and seek out that dear and unhappy child. It is there in your own writing, madame, 'dear, unhappy child.'"

There was a profound silence at this moment. The Queen was sounding the depths of memory; Madame de Chevreuse was laying her snares.

"Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria. "How sad was the existence of that poor child ending in such a cruel death."

"He is dead!" cried the duchess, with an eager curiosity which the Queen recognised as genuine.

"He died of consumption, wilted and forgotten like the poor flowers given by a lover to his mistress, and left by her to fall to ashes in some secret drawer where she had hidden them."

"Dead!" repeated the duchess, in a tone of discouragement, which might have cheered the Queen had it not been tempered by a mixture of doubt. "Did he die at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of the governor, a poor faithful servant who did not long survive him."

"That is easy to imagine; such a secret and such mourning are a heavy load to bear."

The Queen did not trouble herself to weigh the irony of this speech, and Madame de Chevreuse went on: "Well, Madame, I inquired at Noisy-le-Sec a few years ago for this poor child. They informed me that he was not believed to be really dead. This was why I did not at once mingle my tears with your Majesty's. If I had indeed believed in the deplorable event, no illusion of mine should have come to awaken your legitimate regrets."

"You say that at Noisy they did not believe the child to be dead?"

"No, Madame."

"What then, did they say of him?"

"They said—but doubtless they were mistaken—they said that one evening about the year 1645, a lady, beautiful and stately, a lady of the highest quality—as was apparent in spite of her mask and mantle—had driven up in a coach to the junction of the cross-roads—the very spot, you remember, where I was in the habit of waiting for tidings of the young prince, when your Majesty deigned to send me——?"

"Well! and what else did they say?"

"That the governor had brought the child to this lady——"

"And then?"

"And that on the following day both governor and child had left that part of the country."

"Ah, you see. There is some semblance of truth in the story, for the poor child died from one of those sudden strokes of illness which cause doctors to say that the life of a child up to seven years old hangs by a thread."

"What your Majesty says is true; no one knows it better

than you, no one would believe it more than I—and yet there is this strange circumstance——"

"What more?" thought the Queen.

"The person who repeated these details to me—the one whom I sent to inquire as to the child's health——"

"You confided such an office to another? oh, duchess!"

"To some one as dumb as your Majesty, as dumb as myself; let us say that it was I, Madame. This person travelling shortly after in Touraine——"

"Touraine?"

"Recognised the governor and the child—or pardon me, I should say thought to recognise them, both alive and both gay and flourishing, one in his green old age, the other in the flower of his youth! Judge from this what faith we can place in rumours upon any subject in the world. But I am wearying your Majesty, I fear, and it is far from my intention. I beg, therefore, to take my leave, after renewing the assurance of my respectful devotion."

"Stay, duchess, let us talk a little of yourself."

"Oh, madame, I belong body and soul to your Majesty."

"Ah! but the proof!"

"What shall it be?"

"Ask some favour of me."

"Your Majesty can grant me an indescribable, an incomparable joy."

"Speak openly," said the queen, in a tone which anxiety made perceptibly colder; "but above all, my good Chevreuse, remember that I am under my son's control now as formerly under my husband's."

"It is this. Do me the honour to come to Dampierre and spend a few days with me."

"Is that all?" cried the Queen in amazement.

"Yes."

"Only that?"

"Good heavens! Do you fancy that I am not asking for the greatest of boons in asking this? If so, you no longer know me. Do you accept?"

"With all my heart. And I shall be glad," added the Queen, with some distrust, "if my presence there can be useful to you in any way."

"Useful!" cried the duchess, with a laugh. "Oh, no, no! but agreeable, sweet, delightful, a thousand times yes! It is a promise, then?"

"It is a vow."

The duchess bowed over the Queen's beautiful hand, and covered it with kisses.

"She is a good woman at heart, after all," thought the Queen, "and—a generous soul."

"Would your Majesty consent to grant me a fortnight's delay before coming?"

"Certainly. But why?"

"For this reason," said the duchess; "knowing that I am in disgrace, no one would be willing to lend me the hundred thousand crowns I need to put Dampierre in a state of repair; but when they know that it is in order to entertain your Majesty, all the funds in Paris will flow in upon me."

"Ah," said the Queen, nodding her head slowly with perfect comprehension, "a hundred thousand crowns! You require a hundred thousand to restore Dampierre?"

"Not a crown less."

"I will lend it to you if you wish, duchess."

"Truly?"

"On my faith as a Queen. A hundred thousand crowns is really not much. Oh, I am sure you have never asked a sufficiently high price for your discretion. Duchess, draw up that table, and I will make out a bond on M. Colbert—no, on M. Fouquet, he is a much more gallant gentleman."

The Queen wrote, presented the order to the duchess, and dismissed her, after embracing her gayly.

CHAPTER III

We will now return to Saint-Mandé, where the superintendent was in the habit of receiving a choice company of Epicureans.

For some time past the host has been severely straitened, and the whole house has borne witness to the distress of the minister. No more reckless and prodigal banquets. Finance has been Fouquet's pretext, and never, as Gourville wittily observed, was a more fallacious pretext, for of finances there was not a trace.

Nevertheless, on his customary reception day Fouquet's friends had arrived in greater numbers than usual. Gourville and the Abbé Fouquet were discussing finance—that is to say, the abbé was borrowing a few pistoles of Gourville. Pélisson, seated with his legs crossed, was reciting the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open parliament; and this speech was a marvellous one, inasmuch as Pélisson was composing it for his friend, and putting into it everything which the latter was most unlikely to think of himself.

Presently La Fontaine and Loret èntered from the garden, eagerly discussing the use of weak rhymes; the painters and musicians were hovering near the dining-hall. On the stroke of eight supper was to be served, and the superintendent never kept the company waiting.

It was already half after seven, and the guests were in fine appetite. As soon as all the company were assembled, Gourville went up to Pélisson, roused him from his reverie and led him into the centre of the salon, after closing the doors. "And now, what tidings have you brought?" he asked; Pélisson, raising his mild, intelligent face, replied:

"I have borrowed twenty-five thousand livres from my aunt. Here they are in treasury bonds."

"Good!" cried Gourville, "there are only one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres wanting for our first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine, in the tone in which he might have asked: "Have you read the book of Baruch?"

"There is our absent-minded friend again!" cried Gourville. "What! it was you who first informed us that the small estate of Corbeil was about to be sold by a creditor of M. Fouquet's; it was you who proposed that all the friends of our Epicurus should subscribe to save it; it was you who offered to sell a corner of your land at Château-Thierry in order to provide your share. And now you come and ask: '*The payment of what?*'"

A general laugh greeted this remark, and caused La Fontaine to blush.

"Pardon me," he said, "it is quite true. I had not forgotten—oh, not at all! only——"

"Then, doubtless," remarked Pélisson, "you have brought your mite with you, the price of the land you sold."

"Sold! oh, no!"

"You have not sold your bit of garden?" asked Gourville in amazement, as he well knew the poet's disinterested nature.

"My wife would not let me," answered the latter, upon which there was another burst of laughter.

"And you?"

"I? Oh, I overturned the table upon her and her friends. Then I mounted my horse and rode away."

When the storm of laughter had somewhat subsided, "Is that all you have brought back?" someone asked.

"Oh, not at all! I have brought back an excellent idea."

"What is it?"

"Have you happened to notice that a great deal of comic poetry is being written in France?"

"Without doubt," replied the company.

"And that very little of it is printed?" pursued La Fontaine.

"The laws are severe, it is true."

"Well, I said to myself, a rare article is a dear article. For that reason I set about composing an extremely licentious little poem."

"Good Heavens!" cried Pélisson, he is a lost soul."

"Do you think so?" asked La Fontaine, simply. "I swear to you that I did not do it for myself, but only for M. Fouquet."

This marvellous conclusion set a climax to the satisfaction of his audience.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," he cried, rubbing his hands. "My eight hundred livres are in this little bag. I offer them to you."

And he at once placed his offering in the hands of the treasurer of the Epicureans.

Next it was the turn of Loret, who gave a hundred and fifty livres. The others emptied their purses likewise, until the total in the bag amounted to forty thousand livres. Never did more generous coin ring in the heavenly scales in which charity weighs kind hearts and good-will against the false coin of devout hypocrisy.

The crowns were still jingling when the superintendent entered or rather glided into the room. He had heard all. Thereupon this man, who had handled many billions, who had exhausted every pleasure and every honour—this immense heart and fertile brain, which, like two burning crucibles, had sucked up all the material and moral treasure of the greatest kingdom in the world—Fouquet crossed the threshold with his eyes full of tears; and as he let this stream of gold and silver flow through his white and slender fingers he said in faltering accents: "Poor offering! you would be lost in the smallest fold of my empty purse, but you have filled my heart to the brim so that it can never be empty again. Thanks, my friends, thanks!" and as he could not embrace all those who surrounded him and who were shedding a few tears also, philosophers though they were, he embraced La Fontaine, exclaiming:

"My poor fellow, who has fallen out with his wife on my account!"

"Oh, that is nothing," replied the poet. "If your creditors will only wait two years I shall have written a hundred more tales, which, at two editions each, will pay off the debt."

Fouquet pressed La Fontaine's hand with charming effusion. "My dear poet," he said to him, "write us a hundred more

tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each will bring it, but for the sake of enriching our language with a hundred masterpieces."

"Ah, ah!" cried La Fontaine, bridling, "you must not think I have brought nothing but this idea and these eighty pistoles to M. le Surintendant."

"Oh, indeed!" was the general exclamation. "M. de la Fontaine is in funds."

"Blessed be the idea if it brings me a million or so," said Fouquet, gayly.

"Precisely so," replied La Fontaine.

"Is it a question of millions?" asked Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand livres here, M. Gourville," and he struck his breast.

"The deuce take the Gascon Château-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"You have found a purchaser for my post of procureur?" cried Fouquet.

"Yes, monsieur."

"But M. le Surintendant has never said that he wished to sell," rejoined Pélisson.

"Excuse me; you yourself have spoken to me of it."

"I am a witness to it," remarked Gourville.

"He is tenacious in regard to his beautiful idea," said Fouquet, smiling. "Come, La Fontaine, who is this purchaser?"

"A real blackbird, a counsellor to parliament, a very worthy man."

"And his name?"

"Vanel."

"What! Vanel?" cried Fouquet, "the husband of——"

"Precisely—her husband; yes, monsieur."

"Oh, this is very diverting; tell us the whole story, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple; I see him from time to time, and a little while ago I met him lounging about the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was taking the coach for Saint-Mandé."

"And he told you——"

"That some one had suggested a parliamentary post to him, that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned, and that from that day Madame Vanel dreams of nothing but being Madame la Procureuse-Générale, and that she is dying of it every night she is not dreaming of it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet

"Wait a moment! Conrart is always telling me that I know nothing of business; you shall see how I conducted this——"

"Let us hear!"

"'But you know,' I said, 'that a post like M. Fouquet's costs dear.'

"'About how much?' he asked.

"'M. Fouquet has refused seventeen hundred thousand livres for it.'

"'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'has reckoned it at fourteen hundred thousand.'

"'In ready money?' I asked.

"'Yes; she has sold an estate she owned in Guienne. She is in funds.'"

"That is a very pretty sum to come into at one stroke!" remarked Abbé Fouquet, sententiously. It was the first time he had spoken.

"That poor Madame Vanel!" sighed Fouquet.

"This Vanel would back down if he were taken at his word," added the Abbé Fouquet.

"I think not," said La Fontaine. "You have still to hear the end of my story."

"Ah! it has an end!" exclaimed Gourville. "Why do we loiter by the way, then?"

"My *dénouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that tenacious blackbird, finding that I was on my way to Saint-Mandé, begged me to bring him with me, and to present him if possible, to M. Fouquet."

"So that——"

"So that he is here; I left him on the lawn of Bel-Air. What shall be done with him, M. Fouquet?"

"Well, it is not fitting that Madame Vanel's husband should be catching cold on my lawn. Send and bring him in, La Fontaine, since you know where he is to be found."

La Fontaine was already far away. Fortunately, Gourville accompanied him, for the poet, absorbed in his own meditations, was hurrying in the direction of Saint-Maur.

A quarter of an hour later M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet. Fouquet, seeing him enter, called Pélisson and spoke a few words in his ear. "Attend closely to my instructions," he said; "have all the gold and silver plate and all the jewels packed into the carriage; you will take the black horses; the jeweller will accompany you; you must put off the supper until Madame de Bellière arrives."

"And we must notify Madame de Bellière, must we not?"

"It is not necessary; I will look to that. Go, my friend."

Pélisson departed, wholly in the dark, but confiding, as do all true friends, in the will to which they submit their own. Therein lies the strength of a devoted soul; distrust belongs to inferior natures. Vanel, in the meantime, had made his bow to the superintendent, and was about to open the conversation.

"Sit down, monsieur," said Fouquet, civilly; "it seems you wish to purchase my office in parliament."

"Monseigneur——"

"Madame Vanel, I am told, estimates it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we possess."

"Can you produce the sum at once?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel awkwardly, abashed by this simplicity, this grandeur, where he had anticipated a contest, much diplomacy, and many wily moves on the chess-board.

"When can you have it?"

"Whenever it suits monseigneur"; and he trembled lest Fouquet should be playing with him.

"If it were not for the trouble of your returning to Paris I should say at once."

"Oh, monseigneur!"

"However," interrupted the superintendent, "we will leave the settlement and signatures until to-morrow morning."

"So be it," replied Vanel, stunned and bewildered.

"At six o'clock," added Fouquet.

"At six," repeated Vanel.

"Adieu, M. Vanel. Say to Madame Vanel that I kiss her hand," and Fouquet rose.

Thereupon Vanel, who had begun to lose his head, exclaimed:

"Monseigneur, monseigneur! do you give me your word?"

Fouquet turned his head: "*Pardieu!*" he said; "and you?"

Vanel hesitated, shivered, and ended by timidly offering his hand. Fouquet held out his and clasped it freely and nobly. The loyal hand rested for a moment in the clammy palm of the hypocrite. Vanel pressed Fouquet's fingers hard in order to convince himself more fully. The latter gently disengaged his hand.

"Adieu," he said. Vanel backed hastily towards the door, retreated into the corridor, and fled.

CHAPTER IV

Hardly had Fouquet dismissed Vanel than he began to reflect for a few moments. "A man cannot do too much," he said to himself, "for a woman he has loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur; why not give her that pleasure? Now that the most scrupulous conscience can have nothing with which to reproach me, I can turn my thoughts to the woman who loves me. Madame de Bellière must be there by this time," and he turned towards the secret door. Then having shut himself in, he opened the subterranean passage connecting the house of Vincennes with his own house. He had neglected to warn his friend of his approach by ringing the bell, but he felt assured that she would not fail to be at the rendezvous. The marquise had in fact already arrived, and was awaiting him. The noise made by the superintendent gave her warning, and she ran to take the note which he slipped under the door for her; and said: "Come, marquise, we are waiting supper for you."

Happy and full of life, Madame de Bellière gained her carriage in the avenue at Vincennes, and was soon upon the terrace, where Gourville, to please his master, was standing ready to give her his hand.

She had not seen Fouquet's black horses gallop up smoking and white with foam, bringing back to Saint-Mandé both Pélisson and the goldsmith, to whom Madame de Bellière had sold her plate and jewels. Pélisson introduced this man into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The latter thanked the jeweller for having been willing to keep as a deposit property which he had the right to dispose of. He cast his eye over the total of the bill, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand livres; then turning to his desk he wrote a draft for fourteen hundred thousand livres, payable at sight, on his treasury, before noon on the following day.

"A profit of one hundred thousand livres!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Not at all, not at all, monsieur," replied Fouquet, tapping him lightly on the shoulder; "there are courtesies that cannot be repaid. The profit is about what you would have made yourself, but there still remains the interest on your money": and with these words he unfastened from his cuff a diamond button, which this same jeweller had many a time estimated

at three thousand pistoles. "Take this as a remembrance of me," he said to the goldsmith; "you are an honest man."

"And you," cried the goldsmith, deeply touched, "you, monseigneur, are a noble gentleman."

Fouquet dismissed the worthy man by a secret door, and then went to receive Madame de Bellière, around whom the guests had all gathered. The marquise was always beautiful, but this evening her loveliness was dazzling.

"Monseigneur is served," announced Vantel, majestically.

The throng of guests hastened towards the dining-hall with more speed than is customary at ministerial banquets, and there a magnificent spectacle awaited them. Upon the buffets, the sideboards, the supper table itself, in the midst of flowers and lights, blazed the most superb gold and silver service imaginable; a relic of the ancient splendours which Florentine artists in the train of the Medicis had cast, wrought, and chiselled for them while there was still gold in France. All this plate was engraved with the arms of Madame de Bellière.

"Look!" cried Fouquet, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable sight of all was at the place assigned to the marquise by Fouquet; beside her plate rose a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos, sardonyx stones engraved by the Greeks of Asia Minor, with settings of Mysian gold; curious antique mosaics from Alexandria mounted in silver; massive bracelets from the Egypt of Cleopatra were heaped up upon a vast platter of Palissy ware, supported on a tripod of gold-bronze sculptured by Benvenuto. The marquise turned pale on beholding these jewels which she had never expected to see again; a profound silence, such as precedes an outburst of intense emotion, pervaded the excited company. Fouquet did not even signal to dismiss the hosts of gorgeous lackeys who were hurrying like a swarm of bees between the great buffets and the serving tables.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you see before you belongs to Madame de Bellière, who one day, finding that one of her friends was in difficulties, sent all this gold and silver to the goldsmith, with this mass of jewels which are piled up before her. This noble action of a friend should be appreciated by such friends as you. Happy the man who finds himself so loved! Let us pledge the health of Madame de Bellière!"

An immense outburst of applause drowned his words, and caused the poor lady to fall back half fainting in her chair, stunned as the birds of Greece were stunned when they flew over the race course at Olympia.

"And now," said Pélisson, whom all virtue touched and

all beauty fascinated, "let us also pledge him who inspired madame's noble deed! For such a man must be worthy of being loved."

It was now the turn of the marquise. She rose, pale and smiling, held out her glass with a trembling hand, whose fingers just touched Fouquet's, while her moistened eyes turned towards his, to meet the love burning in that generous heart.

Thus the joyous hours flew by, showering roses on the guests. Contrary to his habit, the superintendent did not retire from the table before the dessert. He smiled around upon these friends, all in that joyous mood, when hearts are intoxicated before the heads; then, for the first time, he glanced at the clock.

Suddenly a carriage rolled into the court-yard, and, strange to say, all heard it amidst the tumult and the songs. Fouquet listened intently and then turned his eyes towards the antechamber. It seemed to him that he heard a step and that this step, instead of treading the floor, was treading on his heart. Instinctively his foot drew away from the foot of Madame de Bellière, which had been resting on his for the last two hours.

"M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes!" announced the usher; and the pensive, sombre face of Aramis appeared in the doorway between the fragments of two broken garlands whose thread the flame of a lamp had just severed.

Fouquet would have uttered a cry of joy on seeing another friend, if Aramis' chilling air and preoccupied look had not restored all his reserve.

"Will you join us over our dessert?" he asked, "or are you dismayed at the noise of our revelry?"

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I must first ask your pardon for intruding on this joyous meeting; then I must beg, when the festivity is over, for a few moments audience on important business."

As this word "business" had caused several of the Epicureans to prick up their ears, Fouquet rose.

"Business first always, M. d'Herblay," he said; "we are only too fortunate in having it arrive at the close of our banquet."

Thereupon he offered his hand to Madame de Bellière, who was gazing at him anxiously, and led her into the adjoining salon, where he entrusted her to the care of some of the more rational of the company.

Then, taking Aramis by the arm, he led him into his cabinet.

Aramis, once there, forgot deference and etiquette; he seated himself at once and began:

"Whom do you think I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, whenever you begin like that I am sure that you have something disagreeable to announce."

"Once more you are not mistaken, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," pursued Fouquet, coolly.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchess?"

"It seems that the duchess is in possession of several letters from M. de Mazarin."

"That does not surprise me. He was a very gallant prelate."

"Yes, but these letters have no connection with the prelate's love affairs. They deal, it appears, with financial matters."

"That is far less interesting."

"Have you never heard that you have been accused of embezzling the public funds? Something like thirteen millions, the disposal of which you would be greatly embarrassed to disclose."

"Thirteen millions!" mused the superintendent, stretching himself at full length in his chair and gazing up at the ceiling. "Thirteen millions; ah, faith! I am looking for them, you see, among all the rest I have been accused of stealing."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur, this is a very serious matter. It is certain that the duchess has these letters, and that they must be genuine since she proposes to sell them for five hundred thousand livres."

"One can get a very pretty calumny at that price," rejoined Fouquet. "Ah! but now I know what you mean," and he began to laugh heartily.

"So much the better!" exclaimed Aramis, slightly reassured.

"The story of these thirteen millions comes back to me. Yes, it must be that; I have it."

"I am rejoiced to hear it. Tell me about them."

"Listen then! One day Signor Mazarin—God rest his soul!—made a profit of thirteen millions out of a concession of contested lands in the Valteline. He scratched them off the register of receipts, sent them to me, and proceeded to make me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good! The use to which they were put is then clearly proved."

"Not at all; the cardinal had them entered under my name and sent me a receipt."

"And you have that receipt?"

"*Parbleu!*" said Fouquet, and he rose tranquilly to look for it in the drawers of his great ebony desk, encrusted with enamel and silver.

"What I admire in you," said Aramis, highly charmed, "is first your memory, next your self-possession, and finally the perfect order that reigns in your house and in your affairs —you, the poet *par excellence.*"

Fouquet took out a bundle of papers and examined them one by one; then he turned pale.

"Do not confine your search to that drawer," cried Aramis, "look elsewhere."

"Useless, useless! I have never made a mistake. No hand but mine ever touches these papers; no one opens this drawer, to which, as you see, I have had a secret lock made, known only to myself."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, much agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen. Madame de Chevreuse was right, chevalier; I have embezzled the public funds; I have stolen thirteen millions. I am a thief, M. d'Herblay."

"Monsieur, monsieur! do not agitate yourself, do not become excited!"

"And why not excite yourself, M. le Chevalier? There never was better reason. It needs but a good trial, a good sentence, and your friend the superintendent may follow his colleague, Enguerrand de Marigny, his predecessor, Samblançay, to the scaffold of Montfaucon."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who had sunk, shuddering, back into his armchair beside the open drawer, and laying his hand on his friend's shoulder said affectionately:

"Do not forget that M. Fouquet's position cannot be compared to that of Samblançay or Marigny."

"And why not?"

"Because those ministers were tried and sentenced, and the sentence was executed, while in your case it can never come to that. You forget that trials of this sort are conducted by parliament, and are instituted by the procureur-général; and since you hold that office you see that unless you should condemn yourself——"

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, striking the table with his doubled fist.

"Well, what—what is it?"

"It is this: I am procureur-général no longer."

At this Aramis turned as pale as death. He clenched his fingers so tightly that they cracked one against another;

and with a haggard glance which overwhelmed Fouquet, said in convulsive accents: "No longer procureur-général?"

"I ceased to be so four or five hours ago."

"Take care!" broke in Aramis, coldly. "I think you cannot be in full possession of your senses, my friend. Collect yourself."

"I tell you," cried Fouquet, "that just now some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand livres for my office, and I have sold it."

Aramis was stunned. His intelligent and mocking expression turned to one of dull terror which affected the superintendent more than all outcry or remonstrance.

"You were, then, in great need of money?"

"Yes, in order to discharge a debt of honour," and in a few words he related to Aramis the story of Madame de Bellière's generosity, and of the way in which he had felt called upon to repay that generosity.

"That was a fine deed," quoth Aramis, "and it cost you —how much?"

"Precisely the fourteen hundred thousand livres—the price of my appointment."

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand livres from me before noon."

"Stay a moment! It is at six o'clock this morning that I am to sign."

"Oh, I answer for it that you will not sign."

"I have given my word, chevalier."

"If you have given it you must take it back, that is all."

"Ah! what are you saying to me?" cried Fouquet, in his frank, loyal tones; "Fouquet take back his word!"

"With whom have we to deal? Who is the man?"

"Vanel."

Aramis turned purple. "What, Vanel!" he cried, springing from his chair. "Vanel! The husband of Marguerité Vanel?"

"Precisely."

Aramis walked straight up to Fouquet and caught him by the hand.

"Do you know," he asked, coldly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! She has a new lover? I was not aware of it. Faith! no, I do not know his name."

"His name is Jean Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of finance; he lives in Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse went this evening to sell Mazarin's letters."

"My God!" murmured Fouquet, wiping his damp brow.

"You begin to understand now?"

"That I am lost? Yes."

"Do you think it worth while now to keep your word a little less strictly than Regulus?"

"No," said Fouquet.

"These stubborn men," mu·mured Aramis, "always contrive to make one admire them."

Fouquet held out his hand to him. At that moment a gorgeous tortoise-shell clock, with figures and hands of gold, that stood on a console opposite the fireplace, struck six. A door creaked in the corridor.

"M. Vanel," said Gourville's voice at the door of the cabinet, "wishes to know if monseigneur can receive him."

Fouquet turned his eyes away from those of Aramis, and said, "Admit M. Vanel!"

CHAPTER V

Vanel was visibly agitated as he advanced into the middle of the room, bowing to each in turn.

"I have come——" he faltered.

Fouquet nodded slightly. "You are punctual, M. Vanel," he said.

"Pardon me," interrupted Aramis, addressing Fouquet, and indicating Vanel with his finger, "it is monsieur, is it not, who has come to purchase your appointment?"

"It is I," answered Vanel, amazed at the tone of supreme *hauteur* with which Aramis had put the question. "But by what name may I address him who does me the honour——?"

"Call me monseigneur," rejoined Aramis, dryly.

Vanel bowed.

"Come, speak frankly, M. Vanel. Is not this affair something of a burden on you? Speak."

"Certainly, monseigneur, fourteen hundred thousand livres is a considerable sum."

"So considerable," said Fouquet, "that I have been reflecting——"

"You have been reflecting, monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

Fouquet took his time. After a moment of silence he resumed:

"Listen, my dear M. Vanel," he said, "I am going to ex-

plain the situation to you." Vanel shuddered. "You are an honest man, and you will see it as I do." Vanel staggered. "Yesterday I wished to sell——"

"Monseigneur went further than wishing to sell. Monseigneur has sold."

"Well, so be it; but to-day I ask you, as a favour, to release me from the word which I pledged you."

"That word you pledged me," repeated Vanel, like an inflexible echo.

"My dear M. Vanel, there is not an affair in this world, however important, which may not be set aside in order to oblige a man, of whom one would thus make a friend."

"Certainly, monseigneur——"

"And the more entirely a friend, M. Vanel, in proportion to the magnitude of the service. Come, M. Vanel, what do you decide?"

Vanel kept silence. Meanwhile Aramis had resumed his close scrutiny. Vanel's narrow visage, his deep-set eyes under their arched eyebrows, had revealed to the Bishop of Vannes a marked type of avarice and ambition. To batter down one passion by means of another still stronger was Aramis' method. He saw that Fouquet was defeated, demoralised; he therefore threw himself into the conflict with fresh weapons.

"Pardon, monseigneur," he said, "you have forgotten to show M. Vanel that his interests are directly opposed to the renunciation of the sale."

Vanel gazed at the bishop in amazement; he had not looked for an auxiliary in that quarter.

Fouquet also paused to hear what the bishop had to say.

"You see," pursued Aramis, "M. Vanel, in order to purchase your office, has sold a property belonging to his wife. That is a serious matter; no one can displace fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand livres, as he has done, without considerable loss and embarrassment."

"That is quite true," rejoined Vanel, for Aramis with his clear-sighted gaze had torn his secret out of his very heart.

"We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet.

It was a dazzling amount. A prince might have been content with such a *largesse*. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king's daughter.

Vanel did not budge.

"You seem to have expended a still greater sum than that, M. Vanel," said the superintendent; "the price of money is high, I know, and you must have made a great sacrifice in

selling your land. What was I thinking of? It is a bond for five hundred thousand livres which I shall sign for you, and even then I shall feel greatly indebted to you."

Vanel showed no gleam of joy or cupidity; he remained impassive, and not a muscle of his face moved.

Aramis cast a glance of despair at Fouquet; then advancing towards Vanel he grasped him by the collar of his coat, with a gesture familiar to men of high consequence, while he said: "M. Vanel, it is not the embarrassed state of your finances, it is not the sale of your land, which is filling your mind at this moment; it is a thought of much more tremendous importance. I understand it at last, so hearken well to my words."

"Yes, monseigneur," and the wretched man began to tremble as the fire in the prelate's eyes seemed to scorch him.

"I offer you, therefore, I, in the name of the superintendent, not three hundred thousand livres, nor yet five hundred thousand, but a million—do you hear, a million?" and he shook him in his nervous grasp.

"A million!" stammered Vanel, turning pale.

"A million; that is to say, at the present rate of interest, an income of sixty-six thousand livres."

"Come, monsieur," said Fouquet, "that is not an offer to be refused Speak, then. Do you accept?"

"I cannot do it," replied Vanel, hoarsely.

"Very well," said Aramis, who had so clutched Vanel by the doublet that at the moment he let go his hold the man staggered back against the wall. "It is clearly to be seen what you came to do here. Come, produce your deed of sale, monsieur, you must have it there in your pocket, as an assassin carries his pistol or his poniard hidden beneath his cloak."

Vanel muttered something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet, "let us see this deed."

Vanel fumbled in his pockets with a shaking hand, and on drawing out his pocket-book a paper dropped from it while he was handing the deed to Fouquet Aramis pounced upon the paper that had fallen, the handwriting of which he had recognised.

"Excuse me," said Vanel, "that is a rough draft of the deed."

"So I see," retorted Aramis with a smile more cruel than the lash of a whip, "and what amazes me is that this draft is in the handwriting of M. Colbert. Look, monseigneur."

He passed the paper to Fouquet, who at once recognised the truth of his statement. Covered with erasures, with words inserted in the margin, this deed—a startling proof of Colbert's plot—revealed it fully to the victim.

"Ah, well," murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, thoroughly cowed, seemed to be looking for a hole into which to crawl and hide his ignominy.

"Well," said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy were not named Colbert, if you had only to face this cowardly thief here, I should say to you: 'Deny it all.' Such a proof of infamy nullifies every pledge; but these people would think it a sign of fear on your part and they would dread you less than they do. Here, monseigneur, sign," he said, and held out a pen.

Fouquet pressed Aramis' hand, then, in place of the deed that was handed him, he took up the rough draft.

"No, not that," cried Aramis, hastily, "this is the one to sign. That document is too precious for you not to preserve it."

"No," replied Fouquet, "I shall sign upon M. Colbert's very paper and write on it: 'Writing approved.'"

He then signed, and said: "Here it is, M. Vanel." The latter seized the paper, laid down his money, and was about to escape.

"One moment!" cried Aramis, "are we sure that the exact amount is here? This must be counted, since it is the money M. Colbert gives to women. Ah! he is not so generous as M. Fouquet, this excellent M. Colbert!" and Aramis spelled out every word, every letter of the bond, while he distilled his anger with contempt, drop by drop, upon the wretched man who had to endure this torture for some bitter moments. Then he was dismissed without a word, but with such a gesture as that with which a beggar is driven away or a lackey dismissed.

When Vanel was gone, the minister and the prelate, with their eyes fixed upon each other, kept silence for a moment.

"Well," said Aramis, breaking the silence first, "to what would you compare a man who, having to fight a furious enemy, clad in mail and armed to the teeth, strips himself, throws aside his weapons, and sends kisses to his adversary? And now let us talk of business."

Fouquet gazed at him with amazement.

"Did you not confide in me, a short time ago, a certain project for a fête at Vaux?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, "that was in my prosperous days!"

"A fête to which, I believe, the King had invited himself."

"No, my dear prelate; a fête to which M. Colbert had advised the King to invite himself."

"Ah, yes! as being so costly an entertainment that you could not avoid ruining yourself by it."

"Precisely so. In my prosperous days, as I was just saying, I took pride in showing my wealth of resource to my enemies. I made it a point of honour to stagger them by creating millions where they saw only possible bankruptcy. No later than to-morrow, after selling my equipages, mortgaging my houses, and reducing my expenses——"

"No later than to-morrow," quietly interrupted Aramis, "you are going to devote yourself unremittingly to preparations for that splendid fête at Vaux which shall be cited in future ages as among the heroic magnificences of your prosperous days."

"You are mad, chevalier."

"Precisely, it must be of unparalleled magnificence!"

"In that case I should have to spend from ten to twelve millions."

"You must spend twenty if necessary," replied Aramis, quite unmoved.

"Where shall I find them?" cried Fouquet.

"That concerns me, M. le Surintendant, and do not let it disturb you for an instant. The money shall be at your disposal before you have drawn up the plan of your fête!"

"Chevalier! Chevalier!" cried Fouquet, feeling himself turning giddy, "where are you dragging me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the Bishop of Vannes. "Cling to my mantle and have no fear!"

"Why did you not say that to me before, Aramis? There was a day when with one million you might have saved me!"

"While to-day—to-day I must give twenty," said the prelate; "so be it! But the reason is a simple one, my friend; on the day you speak of I had not a million at my disposal, while to-day I can easily obtain the twenty we require."

"I give myself unreservedly into your hands," murmured Fouquet.

"Oh! I do not understand it in that way; it is I, rather, who am yours without reserve. It is you with your fine, ingenious fancy who must contrive the whole fête, even to its minutest details. Only——"

"Only?" questioned Fouquet, like a man accustomed to weighing the importance of parentheses.

"Well, only that while I leave the entire conception of the affair to you, I reserve to myself the charge of carrying it out."

"How so?"

"I mean that you must make me your major-domo for

that day; your superintendent, a sort of factotum, combining in one person the steward and captain of the guards. I will set your people to work, and will keep the keys of the doors. You shall give the orders, but through me—they will pass through my lips to reach those for whom they are intended. You understand?"

"No; I understand nothing."

"But you accept?"

"*Pardieu!* my friend. I do, indeed."

"That is all I require—thanks; then I leave you to make out your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Every one."

CHAPTER VI

After talking reason with the greybeards we love to join in the pleasing madness of the young. Thus, if the threads of our story do not connect this chapter very closely with the one we have just penned, we are no more troubled thereby than was Ruysdael when painting an autumn sky immediately after a spring landscape. We recommend our readers to do likewise, and to take up Raoul de Bragelonne with us at the exact point where our last sketch left him.*

Wild, terrified, despairing—and rather bereft of reason, plan, and will—Raoul rushed forth after the scene in La Vallière's chamber. The King, Montalais, Louise, that chamber; his own strange expulsion from it; Louise's grief, Montalais' terror, the King's wrath—all presaged a great disaster—but what?

Having hastened over from London on the first intimation of danger, he found himself at once face to face with that danger. Was this not enough for a lover? Yes, doubtless, but it was not enough for a noble heart, proud to stake all upon its faith in a loyalty equal to its own.

Yet Raoul did not seek for explanations where a jealous or a less timid lover would have at once demanded them. He did not go straightaway to his mistress and say to her: "Louise, do you no longer love me? Louise, do you love another?" A man full of courage, as ardent in friendship as in love, a scrupulous observer of his word, and believing in

* The Vicomte de Bragelonne, an earlier work in the Dumas series of historical romances.

the word of others, Raoul said to himself: "Guiche wrote to warn me. He must know something. I shall go and ask Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen."

The journey was not a long one. Guiche had been brought back to Paris two days before. He had begun to recover from his wound, and was able to take a few steps about his room. He gave a cry of joy on seeing Raoul enter with the eagerness of friendship. Raoul gave a cry of grief as he beheld Guiche so pale, thin, and sad.

"Ah! it is the old story. We love, and therefore we die," cried Raoul, seating himself at his friend's side.

"No, no, we do not die," replied De Guiche, "since I am recovering, and since I hold you in my arms——"

"Thanks! I am burning with impatience. I have hastened back from London, in half the space of time the King's couriers take for the journey. Tell me why you summoned me."

"I only wished to bring you back."

"There is something more—I am sure of it."

"No, upon my honour!"

"You did not tear me suddenly away from all hopes of promotion, you did not expose me to being disgraced by the King for returning in defiance of orders, you cannot have planted this gnawing jealousy in my breast, simply to say to me: 'All is well, sleep peacefully!'"

"Now you are unjust, and you forget that you have a poor wounded fellow to deal with—one who is the other half of your heart besides. There, calm yourself! I said 'Come,' and you are here. Do not ask more of the unfortunate Guiche!"

"Oh, you tell me a thousand, thousand times more than if you spoke! Facts, in pity's name, give me facts! My friend, my only friend, speak! My heart is broken, crushed —I am dying of despair!"

Raoul rose. Guiche attempted to do the same, in spite of his weakness.

"Look you," he said, "I will add no word further. I have already said too much or too little. But on my life, we are looking far afield when we have the very man you want under our hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Yes; that is true, that is true."

"Go, then, to him. He will throw light upon it all without trying to wound your eyes."

At that moment a lackey entered.

"What is it?" asked Guiche.

"Someone is waiting to see M. le Comte in the Porcelain cabinet."

"Very well. You will excuse me, dear Raoul? I am so proud to be able to walk again." And he took his leave of Raoul.

The latter remained motionless, absorbed, crushed, like the unfortunate miner upon whom the pit has caved in, and who, sorely wounded, with his blood flowing, his brain confused, still tries to collect himself, and use his reason to save his life. A few minutes sufficed with Raoul to dispel the bewilderment caused by these new revelations. He hastily left the count's apartment, reproaching himself as he went for having spoken to Guiche only of his own affairs; and thus he arrived at D'Artagnan's quarters.

D'Artagnan gave a growl of satisfaction on perceiving his friend's son:

"Raoul, my lad," he cried, "how does it chance that the King has recalled you?"

These words jarred upon the ear of the young man, who replied, as he seated himself:

"Upon my word, I know nothing about it. All I know is that I have come back."

"Oh, oh! and why is that?" asked D'Artagnan, loosening his sword-belt and softening his rugged smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière is false to me."

D'Artagnan's expression did not change.

"She is false to you, false! These are big words! Who has been using them?"

"Everyone."

"So you wish me to take sides——"

"Without doubt."

"But I do not meddle in such affairs; you know that very well."

"I tell you that I love Louise to distraction."

D'Artagnan's eyes read the very depths of Raoul's heart.

"It is impossible, I say. You are like all young men. You are not in love. You are mad."

"Well, even if it were only that?"

"I will say more: if I were so unfortunate as to know something of this matter, and so foolish as to tell you what I know—you are my friend, you say?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, it would merely set us by the ears. You would never forgive me for destroying your illusions, as people express it who are in love."

"M. D'Artagnan, you know all; and yet you leave me to bewilderment, to despair, to death! It is frightful!"

"But, my dear fellow, do you imagine that I have stuffed my brain with all that talk about a carpenter and a painter, about the staircase and the portrait, and a hundred more idle tales?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean by this carpenter?"

"Faith! what do I know? I was told some tale about a carpenter who made an opening through a floor."

"In La Vallière's apartment?"

"Oh, I do not know where!"

"Or in the King's?"

"Good! If it were in the King's apartment I should be likely to tell you of it, should I not?"

"Where, then?"

"For an hour I have been dinning it into your ears that I do not know."

"But the painter, then—the portrait?"

"It seems that the King had a portrait painted of one of the court ladies."

"Of La Vallière?"

"Ah! you have nothing but that name on your lips! Who is talking of La Vallière?"

Raoul struck his forehead in despair. "It will kill me," he cried.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you are right," and he took a step or two, as if going away.

"Where are you going?" said D'Artagnan.

"I am going in search of some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière herself, you mean, doubtless," said D'Artagnan with a smile. "That is a famous idea you have; you wished to be consoled and you will be so at once. She will tell you no evil of herself, that is certain!"

"You are mistaken, monsieur, the woman to whom I am going will tell me much evil."

"Montalais, I wager!"

"Yes, Montalais."

"Ah, her friend? A woman who in that capacity will be sure to exaggerate the good or the evil—my good Raoul, do not go to her."

"That is not the true reason why you wish me not to see Montalais."

Suddenly the door opened, and a musketeer approaching D'Artagnan said:

"Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" muttered D'Artagnan, "ask her to come in, and I shall see whether it is to me she wishes to speak."

The wily captain had guessed rightly. Montalais on entering perceived Raoul at once and cried:

"Monsieur! Monsieur!—Excuse me, M. d'Artagnan."

"Oh, I will excuse you, mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I am well aware that at my time of life whoever seeks me out must have great need of me."

"I was seeking M. de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"What a lucky coincidence! He was also seeking you. Raoul, do you not wish to go with mademoiselle?"

"With all my heart."

"Go, then!" and he pushed Raoul gently out of the cabinet; then taking Montalais' hand in his:

"Be kind to him," he said in a low voice; "spare him and spare her."

"Ah!" she replied in the same tone. "It is not I who will speak to him."

"Who is it, then?"

"It is Madame who has sent me for him."

"Ah, good!" cried D'Artagnan. "It is Madame, is it? Before an hour is over the poor boy will be cured!"

"Or dead!" added Montalais, compassionately.

"Farewell, M. d'Artagnan!"

And she hastened to rejoin Raoul, who was waiting for her outside the door, greatly perplexed and disturbed by this dialogue, which boded no good to him.

CHAPTER VII

Lovers are very tender towards everything which concerns the person they are in love with. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais than he kissed her hand with fervour.

"There, that will do, dear M. Raoul," the young girl said sadly. "You are only throwing your kisses away, and I warrant you that they will bring you back no interest."

"How do you mean that? What is it? Will you explain yourself, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything. It is to her that I am taking you."

"What——!"

"Silence, and no more of those wild, startled glances. The very windows have eyes, and the walls sharp ears. Do me the favour not to look at me; be so kind as to talk to me of the rain and the fine weather, and the delights of England."

Raoul clinched his fists, quickened his steps, and assumed the bearing of a man of courage, it is true, but of a man of courage on his way to the scaffold. Montalais, with a quick-glancing eye and nimble step, preceded him, her head in the air. Raoul was introduced at once into Madame's apartment. Henrietta, more charming than ever, was half reclining in an easy-chair, her tiny feet on a footstool of embroidered velvet. She was playing with a silky long-haired kitten, which was biting her fingers and hanging from her lace collar. Madame was dreaming; she was dreaming so profoundly that it required both Montalais' voice and Raoul's to rouse her from her reverie.

"Your Highness sent for me," repeated Raoul. Madame shook her head as if awakening, from sleep.

"Good-day, M. de Bragelonne," she said. "Yes, I sent for you. You are just returned from England, are you not?"

"At your royal Highness's service."

"Thanks! You can leave us, Montalais;" and the latter left the room.

"You have a few moments to give me, have you not, M. de Bragelonne?"

"My whole life belongs to your royal Highness," replied Raoul deferentially, divining some mystery beneath Madame's courtesy, and not altogether displeased by that courtesy, persuaded as he was of a certain affinity between Madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, the strange character of this princess, with its blending of wilful caprice and fantastic despotism, was well known to all the more intelligent of the courtiers. Madame had been flattered beyond measure by the King's homage; Madame had made herself talked about, and had aroused in the Queen that mortal jealousy which is the gnawing worm at the heart of all feminine happiness; Madame, in a word, in attempting to heal her wounded pride, had found her own heart engaged.

Raoul drew near her. "Madame," he said, "your royal Highness has something to communicate to me, and your natural generosity leads you to spare me. I implore your Highness to spare me nothing! I am strong, I can bear it."

Henrietta rose precipitately, and took a few steps up and down the chamber.

"M. de Bragelonne," she said, "what none of your friends

were willing to do, I will do for you, because I like and esteem you. I will be your friend. You carry your head among them all here like a man of honour; I do not choose that you should bow it beneath a storm of ridicule—in a week from now, perhaps, beneath a tempest of scorn!"

"Ah!" cried Raoul, turning livid, "has it come to that?"

"If you do not know all," said the princess, "I see that you divine it. You were betrothed to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, were you not?"

"I was, madame."

"By that right, then, I owe you a warning, since one day I may dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière from my service——"

"Dismiss La Vallière!" cried Raoul.

"Without doubt. Do you think I can go on considering the King's tears and lamentations? No, no, my house shall no longer be used for such doings. But you are trembling!"

Raoul bent his head.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The King loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to imply that she does not love him."

"Alas, madame, I am still thinking of the time when she loved me."

Henrietta had a moment of admiration for this sublime incredulity; then shrugging her shoulders:

"You do not believe me?" she said. "Oh, how you love her, you; and you doubt her love for the King?"

"Until I have proof. Pardon me, but I have her word, you see, and she is the daughter of nobles."

"A proof? Well, so be it! Come with me."

The princess, preceding Raoul, led him across the courtyard towards that part of the building in which La Vallière lived, and ascending the staircase, she stopped at the door of the chamber where the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The moment was well chosen for carrying out the project conceived by Madame Henrietta; the château was deserted, the King, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court having gone to Saint-Germain. Madame Henrietta alone, knowing that Bragelonne had returned and thinking how she might turn his arrival to account, had pleaded indisposition and remained behind.

Madame was sure, therefore, of finding La Vallière's apartment and that of Saint-Aignan vacant. She took a double key from her pocket and opened the door of the maid of honour's apartment. Bragelonne's gaze plunged into the chamber, which he recognised, and the impression which the

sight made upon him was one of his first torments. The princess glanced at him and her experienced eye could detect all that was going on in the young man's heart.

"You know where you are?" asked Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe, Madame, that I am in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's chamber."

"You are there, indeed."

"But I beg to remind your Highness that this chamber is merely a chamber, and proves nothing——"

"Wait," and so saying the princess walked towards the foot of the bed, folded back the screen, and, stooping to the floor, said:

"Look here! Stoop down, and raise this trap-door yourself. The fourth plank of the floor, press upon the spot where there is a knot-hole in the wood. Those are the directions. Press it yourself, vicomte, press. Here it is!"

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his thumb on the spot indicated, and instantly the spring worked, and the trap-door rose of its own accord.

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes, and a very elegant one," said Henrietta. "You see, vicomte, that it has a balustrade to save from a fall delicate persons who might venture to descend it; therefore I will risk it. Come, vicomte, follow me, follow me!"

"But before I follow you, Madame, tell me where this staircase leads."

"You know, perhaps, that M. de Saint-Aignan formerly had an apartment side by side with the King's?"

"Yes, Madame, I know that it was so before I went away, for I had the honour several times of visiting him in his old lodging!"

"Well, he obtained permission from the King to exchange that handsome, convenient apartment for the two small rooms to which this staircase leads, and which constitute a lodging twice as small and ten times as remote from that of the King; and yet proximity to his Majesty is not usually disdained by gentlemen of the court."

"Very good, madame," rejoined Raoul, "but go on, I pray you. I do not yet understand."

"Well, it happened quite by chance that M. de Saint-Aignan's lodging is situate below that of my maids of honour, and directly under that of La Vallière."

"But what is the object of this trap-door and the staircase?"

"Upon my word, I do not know. But shall we descend to

M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment? Perhaps we shall there find the key to the enigma."

Madame set the example by going down the stairway herself, while Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. Each step that creaked beneath Bragelonne's footsteps brought him further into this mysterious apartment which seemed to be still pervaded with La Vallière's sighs and the suave perfume of her presence. Mute and crushed, he had nothing further to learn, and merely followed his remorseless guide as the victim follows his executioner.

Madame, with the cruelty innate in a nervous, delicate woman, spared him not a single detail. But it must be said that in spite of the sort of apathy into which he had fallen, not one of these details would have escaped Raoul, even had he been alone. He divined all—the hands clasped in each other, the faces pressed close together before these mirrors in vows made doubly sweet as the dear image thus reflected is stamped the more deeply on the memory. He divined the kisses exchanged behind these heavy hangings, and he turned in feverish pain from the mute eloquence of the couches standing in the shadow. At such moments Heaven itself seems to have taken part against the discarded lover.

One last torment was reserved for poor Raoul when Madame Henrietta raised a silken curtain and he beheld behind it La Vallière's portrait; and not her portrait only, but La Vallière young, joyous, beautiful, drinking in life at every breath—for at eighteen life is love.

"Louise!" murmured Raoul, "Louise! It is true, then? Ah, you never loved me, for you never looked at me, with a glance like that!"

And it seemed to him that his heart was being wrung within his breast.

"M. de Bragelonne," said Henrietta, "a heart such as yours deserves every respect and consideration from the heart of a queen. I am your friend, monsieur, therefore I did not choose that your whole life should be poisoned by treachery and soiled by ridicule. It was I who, more courageous than all your so-called friends—with the exception of M. de Guiche—summoned you back from London; it is I who have furnished you with these painful but necessary proofs which will work your cure, if you are a valiant lover and not a whimpering Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me, rather, and do not serve the King less faithfully."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah, I had forgotten that; the King is my master!"

"Your liberty is at stake! your very life!"

"Would it be an indiscretion to ask you how you discovered the secret of this trap-door, of this portrait?"

"Oh, nothing could be simpler; for purposes of surveillance over my maids of honour, I have duplicate keys to their apartments; it appeared to me strange that La Vallière should shut herself in so often; it seemed to me strange that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his lodging; it seemed to me still stranger that the King should visit M. de Saint-Aignan daily, however close his friendship for him; and finally it seemed very strange that so many things should happen during your absence, that the very customs of the court should be changed. I do not wish to be tricked by the King, nor to serve as a cloak to his *amours*; for after La Vallière who weeps, he will have Montalais who laughs, and Tonnay-Charente who sings. It places me in a position most unworthy of me. I therefore set aside all scruples of friendship, I discovered the secret. I am wounding your feelings; once more forgive me, but I had a duty to fulfil. It is over, you are now warned; the storm will soon burst, and you must protect yourself."

"You anticipate some result, however, Madame," replied Bragelonne, firmly; "you do not imagine that I shall accept without protest the shame and treachery to which I have been subjected?"

"You will take what measures you please on that subject, M. Raoul, only do not reveal the source from which you have learned the truth. That is all I ask, that is the only return I claim for the service I have done you."

"Have no fear, Madame," replied Bragelonne, with a bitter smile. "I ask only for a moment to write a line to some one."

"That is dangerous, M. de Bragelonne. Take care!"

"No one can know that it was your royal Highness who did me the honour to bring me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am about to write."

"Do it then, monsieur."

Raoul had drawn out his tablets and now wrote rapidly the following words:

> "MONSIEUR LE COMTE: *Do not be surprised at finding here this paper signed by me. I shall shortly send one of my friends to you, who will have the honour of explaining the object of my visit.*
>
> "VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE."

He folded the sheet, and slipping it into the lock of the door which communicated with the chamber of the lovers, and assuring himself that the paper was so plainly visible that Saint-Aignan could not fail to see it on entering, Raoul re-

joined the princess, who was already at the head of the stairs.

On the landing they separated—Raoul with protestations of gratitude to her Highness, Henrietta full of commiseration, or pretended commiseration, for the unhappy man whom she had condemned to such atrocious torture.

"Alas!" she exclaimed, as she watched him depart, pale as death, and with blood-shot eyes; "if I had but known, I would have hidden the truth from that hapless young man!"

CHAPTER VIII

The numerous individuals we have introduced into this narrative is the cause of each of them being obliged to appear only in his own turn, and according to the exigencies of the recital. Accordingly, our readers have had no opportunity of meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau.*

The honours which he had received from the King had in no wise altered the mild and affectionate nature of this worthy gentleman; only he carried his head a trifle higher than was his wont, and bore himself with an air of majesty since he had been honoured by an invitation to dine at the King's table. But if anyone had asked him: "Is there anything lacking to you, Porthos?" he would assuredly have answered "Yes".

After a dinner, during which he had striven to recall all the details of the royal dinner, Porthos, half-joyous, thanks to the good wine he had been drinking, half-sad, thanks to his schemes of ambition, was beginning to abandon himself to a siesta when his valet-de-chambre came to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him.

Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the state of mind we already know. Raoul advanced and shook Porthos by the hand, while the latter, surprised by the gravity of his aspect, offered him a chair.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have come to ask you a favour."

"That happens most fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos. "What do you wish to ask me, dear Raoul? What is it you want?"

"Give me your opinion upon quarrels, my dear friend."

"My opinion? Why, let me see! Could you not develop your idea a little?" replied Porthos, scratching his head.

* The Vicomte de Bragelonne.

"I mean to say, are you apt to be good-tempered when there is a falling-out between friends of yours and strangers?"

"Good! here I am; do you wish to fight?"

"Unquestionably."

"That is very natural; with whom?"

"With M. de Saint-Aignan."

"I know him—a charming fellow who was very civil to me the day I had the honour of dining with the King. Most certainly, I shall return his civility, even if it were not my habit. So he has offended you?"

"You will oblige me by merely saying to M. de Saint-Aignan—who will understand you perfectly—that he has given me offence, in the first place, by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings—good!" said Porthos, beginning to count on his fingers. "Next?"

"Next by having a trap-door made in his new lodgings."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door, indeed! The deuce! that is serious; you have every reason to be in a rage. What does the fellow mean by having trap-doors made without consulting you? Trap-doors, *mordieux*! I have none myself except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"You may add," continued Raoul, "that my last reason for considering myself insulted is a certain portrait which M. de Saint-Aignan knows well."

"What! a portrait besides? A change of lodging, a trap-door, and a portrait? Why, my friend," said Porthos, "with only one such grievance there is enough to embroil all the gentlemen in France and Spain, and that is not saying little."

"Then you are sufficiently provided, my friend?"

"I shall take a second horse. Choose your place of rendezvous, and while you are waiting there you can try a few passes to put yourself in a state of elasticity."

"Thanks! I shall wait you in the wood of Vincennes, near the Minimes."

"That is well. Where is M. de Saint-Aignan to be found?"

"At the Palais-Royal."

Porthos rang a huge bell, and as his valet appeared, he said: "My court suit, my horse, and a led horse." The valet bowed and left the room.

As for Raoul, he went on his way, saying to himself, with secret joy: "Oh, perfidious King! Traitor King! I cannot reach you, nor do I wish it—the persons of kings are sacred. But your accomplice, the servile coward who is your representative, shall pay for your crime. I shall kill him in your name, and after that is done we will think of Louise!"

Porthos, entrusted, to his great delight, with this mission,

which renewed his youth, spent a half hour less than was his custom over a ceremonious toilet. Like a man accustomed to the great world, he sent his lackey in the first place to inquire whether M. de Saint-Aignan was at home. He received an answer to the effect that M. de Saint-Aignan had just had the honour of accompanying the King to Saint-Germain, with the whole court, but that M. le Comte had at that moment returned home. Upon this reply, Porthos made all possible haste, and reached Saint-Aignan's apartment just as the latter was having his boots pulled off.

The ride had been a superb one. The King, more and more in love, and ever more flushed with happiness, had been in the most charming humour towards every one. He had showered favours beyond all mortal favours—as the poets of the day were in the habit of saying.

M. de Saint-Aignan had taken off his coat, and vest, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds had asked to see him.

"Eh!" said he, "what is this bunch of names? I know no such person."

"It is the gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honour of dining with M. le Comte at the King's table while his Majesty was at Fontainebleau."

"With the King at Fontainebleau?" cried Saint-Aignan. "Well, quick, quick! introduce the gentleman."

The lackey hastened to obey, and Porthos was ushered in.

The usual civilities were exchanged between the two gentlemen, then the count, being the host, said:

"M. le Baron, to what happy chance do I owe the favour of your visit?"

"M. le Comte," replied Porthos. "I have merely come to inform you that you have cruelly offended one of my friends."

"I, monsieur?" cried Saint-Aignan; "I have offended a friend of yours? Who may it be, I beg?"

"M. Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have given offence to M. de Bragelonne?" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan. "I assure you, sir, it is quite impossible, for M. de Bragelonne, whom I know very slightly, whom, in fact, I may say I do not know at all, is in England. Not having seen him for a long time, I cannot possibly have given him any cause for offence."

"M. le Bragelonne is in Paris, M. le Comte," said Porthos, quite unmoved, "and as for your having offended him, I can answer for it, since he told me so himself. Yes, M. le Comte, you have cruelly, mortally offended him, I repeat the word."

"But it is impossible, M. le Baron, I swear to you it is impossible."

"Moreover," added Porthos, "you cannot be in ignorance of the fact, since M. de Bragelonne assured me that he had already warned you by a note."

"I have received no note, monsieur, I give you my word."

"That is extraordinary!" replied Porthos, "since Raoul said——"

Saint-Aignan, looking straight before him, saw in the key-hole of the adjoining room the famous paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there before leaving.

"What is this?" he said.

"That may be the very one, M. le Comte. Look!" said Porthos.

Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne," he cried.

"You see I was right. Oh! when I state a thing——"

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne in person," murmured the count, turning pale. "But this is shameful! How could he possibly have made his way in here?"

Porthos left him awhile to his reflections, then he reverted to his message. "Would it please you to return to our affair?" he asked.

"But I believe I understand it now by this note which has reached me so strangely. M. de Bragelonne is about to send a friend to me——"

"I am the friend. It is my coming which he announced to you."

"And he complains that I have offended him?"

"Yes, cruelly, mortally."

Porthos pronounced the last words with a confidence which to a man unaccustomed to his ways must have revealed an infinity of meaning.

"Mystery, so be it! Let us look into this mystery," said Saint-Aignan.

"The first reason is that you have changed your lodging, monsieur," said Porthos

"It is true enough; I have changed my lodging," said Saint-Aignan.

"You acknowledge it?" replied Porthos, with visible satisfaction.

"What!" cried Saint-Aignan, who was becoming irritated by the coolness of this personage, "I am to consult M. de Bragelonne as to whether I shall move or not? Come, come, monsieur!"

"Obligatory, monsieur, obligatory! However, you will

admit that this is nothing compared with the second grievance"; and Porthos assumed an air of severity. "What of the trap-door, monsieur?"

Saint-Aignan at this turned excessively pale, and pushed back his chair so suddenly that Porthos, simple though he was, perceived that the blow had struck home.

"But, monsieur," replied the count, earnestly, "such a secret should be ignored even by the confessor."

"We will consider the matter," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, at any rate."

"This fellow is a madman," thought Saint-Aignan. "What does he want with me?"

Then he added aloud:

"Come, monsieur, let us hush up this matter."

"You forget the portrait," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder which froze the blood in the count's veins.

Since the portrait was that of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and there was no longer room for doubt on this point, Saint-Aignan felt his eyes at last unsealed.

"Ah!" he cried, "monsieur, I now remember that M. de Bragelonne was betrothed to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air, the majesty of ignorance.

"It matters nothing to me, nor does it to you," he said, "whether my friend should be betrothed or not to her of whom you speak. I am surprised, indeed, that you should have pronounced so indiscreet a word. It might greatly injure your cause, monsieur."

"Monsieur, you are delicacy, loyalty, and good sense personified. I see perfectly now what is in question. As to the portrait—for I understand perfectly that the portrait is the crowning grievance—as to this portrait, look you, am I the culprit? Who wished for her portrait—was it I? Who is in love with her—is it I? Who desires her, who has won her—is it I? No, a thousand times no! I know that M. de Bragelonne must be in despair. I know that such misfortunes are cruel indeed. Look you, I too suffer. But is resistance possible? If he struggles he will be laughed at; if he persists, he will be ruined. You will tell me that despair leads to madness; but you are reasonable, you understand me. I see by your serious, thoughtful air, your look of perplexity even, that you are struck by the gravity of the situation. Return, then, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him in my name for having sent, as his messenger, a man of your merit. What can I do for you? What may I solicit for you, demand, even? Speak, monsieur, speak!"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below; will you

do me the favour to mount him? He is well trained and will play you no tricks."

"Mount your horse? and for what purpose?" asked Saint-Aignan blankly.

"To ride with me to the place where M. de Bragelonne is waiting for us."

"But where is M. de Brage'onne expecting me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"But the Minimes is a rendezvous for duels. What have I to do at the Minimes, then?"

Porthos deliberately drew his sword and said: "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"*Corbleu!* this man is mad," cried Saint-Aignan.

The colour mounted to Porthos' ears, as he said: "Monsieur, if I had not the honour of being in your own apartments, and if I were not here in M. de Bragelonne's interest, I would throw you out of the window. As it is, it shall be simply postponed, and you will lose nothing by the delay. Are you coming to the Minimes, monsieur?"

"Eh!"

"Are you coming of your own free will?"

"But——"

"Otherwise I shall carry you. Take care!"

"Basque," cried M. de Saint-Aignan. Basque entered.

"The King has summoned M. le Comte," he said.

"That is a different matter," said Porthos; "the King's service before all. We will wait until this evening, monsieur." And bowing to Saint-Aignan with his wonted courtesy, Porthos left the room, enchanted at having made up one more quarrel.

Saint-Aignan watched him as he went out; then hurriedly slipping on his coat and vest, he set forth on the run, repairing the disorder of his toilet on the way, and saying to himself:

"The Minimes! The Minimes, indeed! We shall see what the King says to this challenge. For it is undoubtedly for him, *pardieu!*"

CHAPTER IX

The King, on returning from his ride, found M. Fouquet awaiting him. Behind the King came M. Colbert, who had been lying in wait for him in the corridor, and who now followed him like a watchful and jealous shadow—M. Colbert, with his square head, and that coarse, untidy richness of

apparel which gave him something the aspect of a beer-drinking Flemish lord.

M. Fouquet at sight of his enemy retained his calm, and during the scene which followed, studied to preserve the difficult attitude of a superior whose heart is overflowing with contempt towards his inferior, but who does not wish to show this contempt lest he should thereby be doing his opponent too much honour. Beneath his enemy's heavy brows and incessantly moving eyelids he could look through the eyes into the depths of Colbert's heart and read the hatred and triumph there. Only, since while reading the other, he wished to remain impenetrable himself, he smoothed his countenance, smiled the charming, sympathetic smile which belonged only to him, and saluting the King with his noblest and most supple grace:

"Sire," he said, "I see by your Majesty's joyous air that your ride was an agreeable one."

"Charming, indeed, M. le Surintendant, charming! You should have come with us, as I invited you to do."

"Sire, I was at work," replied the superintendent, who did not even trouble himself to turn his head and look in Colbert's direction

"Ah, the country! M. Fouquet," cried the King. "*Pardieu!* how I should like to live always in the country, in the open air, beneath the trees."

"Oh! your Majesty is not yet weary of the throne, I trust."

"No, but thrones of verdure are full of charm."

"In truth, Sire you gratify my every wish by these words; for I was about to present a request to you."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"The King once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet. "Your Majesty is aware that I destine my estate of Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the mightiest of kings."

"I have promised, monsieur," said Louis XIV, smiling, "and a King has only his word."

"And I have now come to say to your Majesty that I am entirely at your orders."

"Very well, then; a week hence, if you please," said the King.

"A week hence, Sire."

"This is Tuesday. Shall we appoint next Sunday week?"

"The delay which your Majesty deigns to grant will greatly assist the labours which my architects will undertake with a view to the entertainment of your Majesty and your friends."

"And, speaking of my friends," returned the King, "how do you name them?"

"The King is master everywhere, Sire. Your Majesty shall draw up the list, and give your own orders. All whom he deigns to invite shall be highly honoured guests of mine."

"Thanks," replied the King, touched by this noble thought, expressed with a noble accent

Fouquet thereupon took his leave of Louis XIV, after a few words devoted to certain details of business. He was conscious that Colbert would remain with the King, that they would discuss him as soon as he was gone, and that neither would spare him. But the satisfaction of giving a final blow, a terrible blow, to his enemy appeared to him a sufficient compensation for all he was to suffer. He, therefore, turned back quickly just as he had reached the door and addressed the King, saying:

"Pardon, Sire, pardon."

"What is there to pardon?" asked the prince with amenity.

"A grave fault, Sire, which I was committing unawares."

"A fault of yours, M. Fouquet? I must certainly pardon you. Against what have you sinned, or against whom?"

"Against all propriety, Sire. I was forgetting to inform your Majesty of a somewhat important occurrence. This morning I sold one of my appointments."

"One of your appointments?" cried the King. "Which one?" Colbert meanwhile had turned livid.

"The one, Sire, which conferred on me a long robe and an air of gravity—the post of procureur-général."

The King gave an involuntary cry, and looked at Colbert, who, with a cold sweat starting from his brow, was on the point of fainting.

"To whom did you sell this post, M. Fouquet?" asked the King.

Colbert leaned against the mantelpiece for support.

"To a counsellor of parliament, Sire, a certain M. Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"A friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet, letting the words drop with inimitable nonchalance, with an expression of unconsciousness and forgetfulness which neither painter, poet, nor actor could reproduce. Then having dealt his blow, having crushed Colbert under the weight of his superiority, the superintendent saluted the King once more and departed, feeling himself in a measure avenged by the stupefaction of the prince and the humiliation of the favourite.

"Is it really possible?" said the King, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared. "He has sold his office?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Colbert, significantly.

"He is mad," hazarded the King.

Colbert this time made no reply: he had caught a glimpse of his master's unuttered thought. That thought avenged him in his turn; jealousy had been added to his hatred, and a threat of disgrace to his plan for Fouquet's ruin. Henceforth Colbert felt assured that between Louis XIV and himself hostile schemes could encounter no obstacle, and that the first false step of Fouquet's, which could serve as a pretext, would precipitate his punishment. Fouquet had let fall his weapons. Hate and jealousy had picked them up.

Colbert was invited to the fête at Vaux by the King; he bowed like a man sure of his position, and accepted like one who confers a favour.

The King had reached Saint-Aignan's name upon his list of invitations, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. Colbert retired discreetly, upon the entrance of the royal Mercury.

Saint-Aignan had parted from Louis XIV scarcely two hours before; but in this first effervescence of his love, when Louis XIV could not see La Vallière he was obliged to talk of her. Now, as the only person to whom he could speak of her quite at his ease was Saint-Aignan, the latter had become indispensable to him.

"Ah, it is you, count!" he cried, on perceiving him, doubly rejoiced at seeing his friend and being rid of Colbert, whose scowling visage always depressed him. "So much the better! I am glad to see you; you will join us on this journey, will you not?"

"What journey, Sire?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"The one we shall shortly be making to Vaux for the fête M. le Surintendant proposes to give us. Ah! Saint-Aignan, you will see a fête at last beside which our diversions at Fontainebleau are mere child's play. I repeat then, Saint-Aignan, that you are to take the journey with us."

"Yes, if between now and then I have not taken a longer and much less agreeable one."

"What is that?"

"Across the Styx, Sire."

"Fie!" said Louis XIV, laughing.

"Does the King know M. le Baron du Vallon?"

"*Pardieu!* yes, a good servant of the King my father, and a jovial guest, on my word! for you are speaking of him who dined with us at Fontainebleau, are you not?"

"The very same; but your Majesty has forgotten to add to his other qualities that of a most amiable man-killer."

"What! he wishes to kill you, this M. du Vallon?"

"Yes, or to have me killed, which comes to the same thing."

"What have you done to him?"

"Ah! nothing to him, but it appears that I have offended one of his friends."

"Well, his name?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, Sire."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne?" cried the King, passing from merriment to a state of stupor. Then after a moment of silence, during which he wiped away the perspiration streaming from his brow: "Bragelonne!" he murmured.

"No more or less, Sire," replied Saint-Aignan.

"But he was certainly in London?"

"Yes, but I can assure you that he is there no longer, Sire."

"And he knows all?"

"Yes, and a great deal besides! Would your Majesty care to glance at the note he sent me?" and Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note we already know. "When your Majesty has read this," he said, "I shall have the honour of informing you how it reached me!"

The King read it in great agitation.

"Well, what next?" he demanded.

"Your Majesty is familiar with a certain wrought lock, closing a certain ebony door which separates a certain chamber from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Certainly, Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, Sire. Well, it is in the keyhole of that lock that I found this note. Who placed it there, M. de Bragelonne or the devil? However, since the note is scented with amber instead of sulphur, I conclude that it must have been, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

"You are right. How did he obtain admittance to your apartment?"

"Ah! that is a serious question, for all the doors were locked, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed, then."

"It is impossible, Sire."

"In that case someone must have sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Sold or given it."

"Why that distinction?"

"Because certain persons, Sire, being above the price of treason, do not sell, but give."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh! Sire, your Majesty has too subtle a mind not to spare me the trouble of naming the person."

"You are right; it is Madame!"

"Ah!" said Saint-Aignan.

"And you think that my sister has formed an alliance with Bragelonne?"

"Do you regard the thing as impossible, Sire?"

"Oh!"

"Listen! Your Majesty is aware how Madame loves perfumes?"

"Yes, it is a taste she has inherited from her mother."

"Verbena especially."

"It is indeed her favourite perfume."

"Well, Sire, my apartment is fragrant with verbena."

The King remained pensive for a while, then resumed:

"But why should Madame take the part of Bragelonne against me?"

In pronouncing these words, to which Saint-Aignan might easily have replied, "A woman's jealousy," the King was sounding his friend to the depths of his heart to read there whether he had discovered the secret of his own gallantries with his sister-in-law. But Saint-Aignan was no ordinary courtier; he did not risk himself lightly in the discovery of family secrets. He therefore skilfully eluded Madame's secret. But since he had given such a proof of sagacity in pointing out that Madame had probably accompanied Bragelonne to his apartment, he must pay the penalty of his vanity and reply clearly to the question: "Why does Madame side with Bragelonne against me?"

"Why?" replied Saint-Aignan; "your Majesty forgets, then, that M. le Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"I do not see the connection," answered the King.

"Ah! pardon, Sire, I thought that M. de Guiche was a great friend of Madame's."

"That is quite true," rejoined the King, "we need look no further; the blow comes from there."

"And to ward it off, Sire, shall we not deal another?"

"Yes, but not of the sort which is dealt out there in the forest of Vincennes," answered the King.

"Sire——"

"Obey me, monsieur."

"As it pleases your Majesty."

"Moreover, I wish to clear up this affair. I must know how any one has dared so to trifle with me as to penetrate into the very shrine of my affections. Those who have done this, Saint-Aignan, cannot be left to you to punish, for it is not your honour they have assailed, but my own."

"But what shall I do in regard to M. de Bragelonne, Sire? He will be seeing me, and——"

"I shall have speech with him, or signify my pleasure to him, before the evening. It is time for me to show certain persons that I am master in my own court."

The King had scarcely pronounced these words, which showed plainly that to the new grudge was joined some remembrance of an ancient one, when the usher appeared on the threshold of the cabinet.

"What is it?" asked the King, "and why do you presume to appear when I have not called you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your Majesty ordered me once for all to admit M. le Comte de la Fère whenever he desired to speak to your Majesty."

"What then?"

"M. le Comte de la Fère is outside awaiting your pleasure."

At these words the King and Saint-Aignan exchanged a glance, in which there was more anxiety than surprise. Louis hesitated a moment; then suddenly forming a resolution:

"Go," he said to Saint-Aignan, "and find Louise; inform her of all that is being designed against us. If, as I prefer not to believe, she already knows all, if she has had herself to endure an attack, tell her for me, Saint-Aignan," added the King, quivering with fever and passion, "tell her that this time, instead of defending her, I shall avenge her, and that so severely that no man in future will dare to raise his eyes to her."

Saint-Aignan exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, and after kissing the King's hand, departed radiant.

CHAPTER X

The King endeavoured to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fère with an undisturbed countenance. He saw clearly that the count's visit was not due to chance. A few moments later Athos, in full court dress—his breast glittering with the orders which he alone of the French court had the right to wear—Athos presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the King was aware at once that his presentiment had not deceived him.

Louis advanced a step toward the count, and with a smile held out his hand, over which Athos bowed with deep reverence.

"M. le Comte de la Fère," said the King, rapidly, "you grant us your presence so rarely at court that it is a piece of good fortune to see you here."

Athos bowed, and replied: "I should wish for the happiness of being always near your Majesty."

"Speak at once, monsieur; I am in haste to satisfy you," and the King with these words seated himself.

"Your Majesty may remember that at the time of M. de Buckingham's departure I had the honour of an interview."

"Yes, I remember—at about that time; but the subject of the conversation—I do not recall."

Athos started. "I am about to have the honour of reminding your Majesty," he proceeded, "that I then addressed you on the subject of a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"We have come to it at last," thought the King. "I remember now," he said aloud.

"And when I asked for Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand, on behalf of M. de Bragelonne, your Majesty refused me."

"That is true," said Louis, dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to add, "that the young lady had no position in the world."

"You may also remember," said the King, with marked emphasis, "that you had a great repugnance for this marriage."

"Very true, Sire."

"And that you asked my approval much against your will."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"In short, I remember also, for I have a memory almost as good as your own, that you spoke these words: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière really loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is not that true?"

Athos felt the blow, but did not yield an inch.

"Sire," he said, "I have already asked your indulgence. There are certain things in this conversation which will become intelligible only at its conclusion."

"Let us hasten to the conclusion, then."

"It is this: Your Majesty then declared that you opposed the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's welfare."

The King was silent.

"To-day M. de Bragelonne is unhappy to that degree that he can no longer defer asking your Majesty for a final release."

The King turned pale; Athos gazed at him fixedly.

"And what," he stammered, "does he—M. de Bragelonne—request?"

"Precisely what I laid before your Majesty in our former interview, that your Majesty would consent to his marriage."

The King clinched his hands convulsively.

"Your Majesty hesitates?" asked the count, without abatement of his firmness or his courtesy.

"I do not hesitate—I refuse," replied the King.

"Then may we be humbly permitted to ask your Majesty the reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! You question me?" cried the King.

"It is a demand, Sire."

The King, striking his fists upon the table spoke in a voice of concentrated passion: "You have forgotten the usages of the court, M. de la Fère. At court none questions the King——"

"It is true, but if one does not question, one is drawn to suppositions."

The King tore the gloves in two which he had been biting for some moments by way of hiding his discomfiture.

"Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs! I am resolved; I will crush all obstacles."

"What obstacles?" said Athos.

The King stopped short like a fiery horse, suddenly checked by the bit, in full career.

"I love Mademoiselle de la Vallière," he said, with as much nobility as passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not prevent your Majesty from marrying Mademoiselle de la Vallière to M. de Bragelonne. It is a sacrifice worthy of a king. It is deserved by M. de Bragelonne, who has already done the King good service and may pass for a brave man. Thus the King by renouncing his love gives proof, at once, of generosity, of gratitude, and of sound policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the King, hoarsely, "does not love M. de Bragelonne."

Athos remained silent for a moment.

"I do not understand, then," he resumed, "why your Majesty should have sent M. de Bragelonne to England. That exile has justly surprised all who value the King's honour."

"Who speaks of the King's honour, M. de la Fère?"

"The honour of the King, Sire, is made up of the honour of all his nobility. When the King offends one of his gentlemen, that is to say, when he takes from him one shred of his honour, it is from himself—the King—that this scrap of honour is torn."

The King, incensed beyond measure, the more so that he felt himself dominated, endeavoured to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire, I will tell you all," pursued the count. "I will not leave here until I have been satisfied by your Majesty or by myself; satisfied by your proving to me that you are in the right, or by my proving you in the wrong. Oh, you will listen to me, Sire! I am an old man, and I have been associated with all that is really great and really strong in your kingdom. I know that you are seeking out what chastisement to inflict on me for my frankness; but I know also what chastisement I shall pray God to inflict upon you, when I lay before him your perjury and my son's misfortune."

The King walked up and down with long strides, his hand thrust in his breast, his head held high, his eyes blazing.

"I had hoped that you would answer me," said the count.

"You have forgotten that you were speaking to the King, monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten that you are destroying the lives of two men. It is a mortal sin, Sire!"

"Go!—at once!"

"Not before saying to you: Son of Louis XIII, you are beginning your reign ill, for you are beginning it by seduction and disloyalty. I and my race are released from all the affection and all the reverence towards you to which I bound my son by oath in the vaults of Saint-Denis, in presence of the mortal remains of your noble ancestors. You are become our enemy, Sire, and we have nought to do henceforth save with God, our only master. Beware, then!"

"You threaten me?"

"Oh, no!" said Athos, sadly, "and I have no more of defiance than of fear in my soul. God, of whom I speak to you, Sire, hears me speak. He knows that for the integrity, for the honour, of your crown, I would still pour forth all the blood left in my veins by twenty years of civil and foreign wars. I can assure you that I no more threaten the King than I threaten the man; but I say to you, you lose two faithful servants by killing faith in the father's heart and love in the son's. The one no longer believes in the royal word; the other no longer believes in the loyalty of man or the purity of woman. One is dead to respect, and the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Having spoken thus, Athos broke his sword across his knee, and slowly laying the two fragments on the floor, and saluting the King, who was choking with rage and shame, he withdrew from the cabinet.

Louis, with his head buried in his arms, spent some moments in recovering himself, then suddenly rising, he pulled the bell violently.

"Call M. d'Artagnan!" he said to the startled ushers.

When Athos returned to his lodgings, pale and grave, he gave his cloak and hat to the lackey and dismissed him, then seated himself at Raoul's side.

"Well, monsieur," asked the young man, with a mournful shake of the head, "are you at last convinced?"

"I am, Raoul. The King loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière"

"And she?"

"He said that she loves him."

"Oh, you see, you see, monsieur!" said the young man, with a despairing gesture.

"Raoul," resumed the count, "I said to the King, believe me, all that you could have said yourself, and I spoke, I trust, in respectful though in firm language."

"And what did you say to him, monsieur?"

"I said, Raoul, that all was ended between him and us; that you could no longer remain in his service. I said that I, for my part, should withdraw into retirement. It only remains for me now to learn one thing."

"What is that, monsieur?"

"What course you have resolved upon?"

"Oh, monsieur, as to my love—perhaps some day, later on, I shall succeed in tearing it from my heart. I hope to do so, with God's help, and the aid of your wise exhortations. As to vengeance, I thought of it only while under the influence of evil thoughts, for there was no one really guilty, upon whom I could avenge myself. I have therefore renounced all thought of revenge."

"Thus you no longer wish to seek a quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"No, monsieur. The challenge has been sent; if M. de Saint-Aignan accepts it, I am ready; but if he does not pick up my glove I shall leave it where it fell."

At this moment a lackey entered to announce M. d'Artagnan. This name rang in very different fashion in the ears of Athos and of Raoul.

The musketeer entered with a vague smile upon his lips. Raoul stood still; Athos went forward to greet his friend, with an expression on his face which did not escape Bragelonne. D'Artagnan replied by a similar movement of the eyebrows, then approaching Raoul, and taking him by the hand, he said, addressing the father and son at once:

"Well, well. We are consoling our child, it seems."

"I must beg your pardon, M. d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "I trembled for an instant, I must own, lest you had come here,

not as M. d'Artagnan, but as captain of the King's musketeers"

"You are mad, my poor Raoul!" cried d'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter, which to an observant ear might have rung a little false.

The young man gazed at both men, striving to read them with all the force of his intelligence, but the penetration of his glance was blunted by the laughing face of the musketeer, and the calm, mild expression of the Comte de la Fère.

"Where are you going, Raoul?" asked the latter, seeing that Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments, monsieur," he replied in his sad low voice. "Do you anticipate having anything important to say to me?"

"Yes, fresh consolations," said D'Artagnan, pushing Raoul gently towards the door. Raoul, perceiving such entire serenity in every movement of the two friends, left the count's room, occupied only with the feeling of his own sorrow.

"Heaven be praised!" he said, "I need think only of myself"; and drawing his cloak about him, so as to hide his melancholy face from the passers-by, he sought his own lodging, as he had promised Athos.

"All is over!" he murmured. "Nothing is left in life! Nothing to expect, nothing to hope for! Guiche has told me so, my father has told me the same, and so has D'Artagnan. All is then a dream in this world. That future which I have pursued these last ten years was a dream! The union of our hearts was but a dream!"

Raoul had reached this point in his sinister reflections when his foot paused mechanically on the threshold of his own dwelling. He had arrived there without seeing through what streets he had passed, or knowing how he had come. He pushed open the door in the same way, and climbed the stair. There was hanging in his room a portrait of La Vallière, which she herself had drawn and given to Raoul. He gazed long at the adored image; then all he had been saying to himself passed through his mind again; all that he had suffered again assailed his heart, and after an interval of silence, "Oh, unhappy that I am!" he exclaimed

Scarcely had he pronounced these words when he heard the sound of a sigh and a deep moan behind him. He turned hastily, and in a corner of the salon he beheld a woman standing, bowed and veiled, who had been hidden by the opening door as he entered. He advanced towards this figure, whose presence no one had announced to him, bowing and asking her name, when suddenly the bowed head was

raised, the veil drawn aside, revealing the face, and the pale sad features.

Raoul recoiled as if he had seen a spectre. "Louise!" he cried, in such despairing accents that it seemed as if no human voice could utter such a cry without breaking all the fibres of the heart.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière, for it was indeed she, took a step forward.

"Yes, Louise," she murmured.

But in that interval, brief as it was, Raoul had time to recover his self-possession.

"You, mademoiselle?" he said; then, with an indefinable accent, "you here?" he added.

"Raoul," she said, "do not turn your frank, kind eyes away from me; you are not one of those men who despise a woman because she has given her heart away, even by a love which causes them unhappiness, or wounds their pride."

Raoul made no answer.

"Alas!" proceeded La Vallière, "it is only too true: my cause is bad, and I scarce know how I shall begin. But I believe the best will be to relate to you simply what has befallen me. As I shall speak only the truth, I shall find my way straight through the darkness, the doubts, the obstacles I have to brave, in order that I may relieve my overflowing heart by pouring out all at your feet."

Raoul still kept silence.

La Vallière gazed at him with a look that seemed to say, "Encourage me! in pity's name, one word!"

This time Raoul looked at the girl, and a scornful smile curled his lip.

"I admire your subtlety, mademoiselle," he said, with a desperate struggle to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him is loyal, but to deceive him, it seems, is wrong, and that you would never do."

"Monsieur, for a long time I believed that I loved you above all, and so long as I believed in my love for you I told you that I loved you. At Blois I loved you. The King came to Blois. I thought that I loved you still. I would have sworn it before the altar, but a day came which undeceived me."

Raoul tried to smile.

"No," went on the girl, with profound conviction, "you will not do me the wrong of disguising your true feelings before me now. You loved me. You were sure of your affection for me. You did not deceive yourself—did not lie to your own heart, while I—I—" and pale as death, flinging her arms above her head, she fell on her knees before him.

"While you," said Raoul, "told me that you loved me when you really loved another!"

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor child, "alas! I love another! and that other—oh, Heaven! let me tell you all, Raoul, it is my only excuse: I love that other better than my life—better than my own soul. Pardon my fault, Raoul, or punish my treason. I came here, not to defend myself, but to say to you: 'You know what it is to love. Well, I love! with a love such that I would give my life—nay, my soul—for him I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief, unless God comes to my aid, unless he has mercy on me.' Raoul, I am here to submit myself to your will, whatever it be—to die if it be your wish that I should die. Kill me then, Raoul, if in your heart you think that I deserve death."

"Beware, mademoiselle," said Raoul, "the woman who invites death is the woman who has nothing but her heart's blood left to give to the lover she has betrayed."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul breathed a deep sigh. "And you love without being able to forget?" he cried.

"I love without wishing to forget, without wishing even to love another," replied La Vallière.

"We must meet no more in this world," he said.

She strove to cry out; he laid his hand across her mouth. She pressed her lips to that hand, and fell insensible.

"Olivain," called Raoul, "lift this lady up, and carry her to her coach, which is waiting at the door."

And he withdrew into his chamber, while the lackey bore away the still unconscious form of La Vallière.

CHAPTER XI

As soon as Raoul had gone out, Athos at once resumed the eager expression he had worn upon D'Artagnan's first entrance. "Well, dear friend," he said, "what did you come to announce to me?"

"I?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Come, I will put you at your ease, dear friend. The King is enraged, is he not?"

"Well, I must confess to you that he is not very well pleased."

"And you have come——"

"From him? Yes."

"To arrest me, then?"

"You have hit the mark, my friend."

"I was expecting it. Let us go."

"I have time enough. Are you not curious, moreover, to hear what passed between the King and me?"

"If it please you to relate it to me, dear friend, I will listen with pleasure," and he motioned D'Artagnan to a large arm-chair, in which the latter stretched himself out at ease.

"I care a great deal about it," continued D'Artagnan, "because the conversation was a rather odd one."

"I am listening."

"Well, in the first place, the King summoned me."

"Immediately on my departure?"

"You had hardly got to the foot of the staircase, so my musketeers told me. I entered, my friend. The King was not red in the face; he was purple. I knew nothing of what had taken place, only I saw upon the floor a sword, broken in two pieces.

"'Captain d'Artagnan,'" cried the King, as soon as he saw me. 'Sire,' I answered. 'I cast off M. de la Fère,' he cried; 'he is insolent.' 'Insolent?' I exclaimed, in such a tone that the King stopped short. 'Captain d'Artagnan,' he resumed, between his set teeth, 'you shall listen to me, and obey me.' 'Such is my duty, Sire.' 'I wished to spare this gentleman—of whom I have some pleasant memories—the affront of having him arrested here in my palace.' 'Ah, indeed!' I rejoined, tranquilly. 'But,' he proceeded, 'you will take a coach. In case he should be returning to his estate, follow him out of Paris and arrest him on the road.' I bowed, and as I remained standing, 'Well, what is it?' asked the King. 'I am waiting, Sire.' 'For what are you waiting?' 'For written orders.' The King seemed annoyed, for indeed this was to commit another arbitrary act, to repeat his high-handed measure, if such it were. He accordingly took up the pen slowly, and in a very bad temper, and wrote: 'This is an order to M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, lieutenant-captain of my musketeers, to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, wherever he may find him.' Then he turned towards me as I stood without moving a muscle of my face. Doubtless he took my tranquillity for bravado, for he signed in haste, and handing me the order, 'Go!' he cried. I obeyed and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand. "Let us be off!" he said. "Shall I walk before you or behind you?"

"You will walk arm in arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, and he took the Comte de la Fère's arm to descend the staircase; thus they reached the landing. Grimaud, the faithful steward of Athos, whom they met in the antechamber, watched

their departure with some anxiety. He knew the world too well not to suspect that some mystery was hidden beneath all this.

"Ah! it is you, my good Grimaud," said Athos. "We are going——"

"To take a ride in my coach," interrupted D'Artagnan, with a friendly nod.

Grimaud thanked D'Artagnan by a grimace which was evidently intended for a smile, and waited upon the two friends to the door. Athos stepped into the carriage first, D'Artagnan followed, without giving any order to the coachman. Their departure had taken place so quietly that it created no sensation in the neighbourhood.

When the coach had reached the quays Athos spoke. "You are taking me to the Bastille, I see."

"I," said D'Artagnan, "I am taking you wherever you wish to go, not elsewhere."

"How is that?" cried the count, in surprise.

"*Pardieu!*" said D'Artagnan, "you understand perfectly, my dear count, that I only undertook this commission in order that you might act your pleasure. You did not expect me to throw you into prison brutally like that, without reflection. If I had anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the guards arrest you."

"And so——" inquired Athos.

"And so, I repeat, we are going wherever you wish."

"Dear friend," said Athos, embracing D'Artagnan, "I recognise you in this!"

"On my faith! it seems to me simple enough. The coachman shall drive you to the barrier of Cours-la-Reine, you will find there a horse which I ordered to be in waiting for you. Mounted on that horse, you can ride three posts without stopping, and I on my side will not return to the King to tell him you are gone until it is too late to overtake you. During that time you will have reached Havre, and from Havre you will sail for England, where you will find the pretty house which my friend, M. Monk, presented to me, without counting the hospitality which will doubtless be offered you by King Charles. Well, what do you say to that plan?"

"Dear friend," replied Athos, calmly, "I should like to convince you of one thing; that is, that I wish to be arrested, that I desire an arrest beyond everything." D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what have you to say?" continued Athos. "So it is! Even were you to let me go free, I should return and deliver myself up. I wish to prove to this young man that the

splendour of a crown has dazzled him; I wish to show him that he can be the greatest of men only by being the wisest and most generous. He imprisons me, he punishes me, he tortures me; so be it. He abuses his power and I will teach him what remorse is, while waiting until God teaches him what expiation is."

"Friend," replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that when you have once said 'no,' it is final. I insist no more: you wish, then, to go to the Bastille?"

"I wish it."

"Then let us go! To the Bastille," cried D'Artagnan to the coachman, and throwing himself back in the coach he began gnawing his moustache with a fury which showed Athos that he had taken, or was about to take, some desperate resolution. There was dead silence in the coach, which rolled steadily along without increasing or relaxing its speed. Athos took the musketeer's hand in his.

"You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I? No, *pardieu!* What you are doing from heroism I should have done myself out of obstinacy."

"But you are convinced that God will avenge me, are you not, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know those upon earth who will aid God's work," replied the captain.

The coach had now reached the outside gate of the Bastille. Here a sentry stopped it, but at a word from D'Artagnan they were allowed to pass. As they entered the wide covered way leading to the governor's court D'Artagnan, whose lynx eye saw everything, even through walls, suddenly cried out:

"Eh! what is that I see?"

"Well, I see a coach arriving—doubtless some poor prisoner like myself whom they are bringing here."

"Athos, I wager that it is he."

"He? Who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say that he is under arrest, since we see that he is alone in his carriage."

"What is he doing here, then?"

"Oh! he is a friend of Baisemeaux, the governor," replied the musketeer, slyly. "On my faith, we have arrived in the nick of time."

"I regret this encounter exceedingly. Aramis on catching sight of me will be doubly annoyed: first, at seeing me here; secondly, at being seen."

"We must contrive to spare Aramis the annoyance you speak of."

"How can we do that?"

"Do as I tell you, or rather, let me manage the thing in my own fashion. I would not advise you to tell a falsehood; it would be quite impossible."

"What then?"

"Oh! I shall lie for two. It comes so easy to the Gascon nature."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped at that moment where the one we have just pointed out had stopped, before the door of the governor's house.

"It is understood, then?" whispered D'Artagnan in his friend's ear. Athos made a motion of assent and they went up the stairs. D'Artagnan had announced that he was bringing a prisoner of state. At the third gate, on the contrary, that is, once fairly in, he merely said: "To M. de Baisemeaux," and they both passed on. They were ushered into the dining hall of the governor, where the first face that met D'Artagnan's eye was that of Aramis, who was seated beside Baisemeaux, awaiting the arrival of a sumptuous repast, whose odour was already filling the apartment. If D'Artagnan assumed surprise, Aramis for his part did not have to assume it. He started on seeing his friends, and his emotion was visible.

Meanwhile Athos and D'Artagnan were paying their respects to the governor, who, amazed, staggered by the presence of three such guests, was making a host of evolutions around them.

"Well how is this?" said Aramis. "By what chance——"

"That is what we would ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we all giving ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis, with affected hilarity.

"Ah, ah!" rejoined D'Artagnan. "It is true; these walls have a devilish aroma of the prison. You know, M. de Baisemeaux, that you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I?" cried Baisemeaux.

"What's this? You seem to have fallen from the clouds. Have you forgotten all about it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale, then red; he looked at Aramis, who looked at him, and ended by stammering:

"Certainly—I am enchanted—but on my honour!—I do not—ah, my wretched memory!"

"I knew how it would be," replied D'Artagnan. "This is how I happened to come: having nothing to do this evening at the Palais-Royal, I thought I would take pot luck with you, and on my way I met monsieur-

Athos bowed.

"M. le Comte, who had just left the King, delivered me an order from him which requires prompt execution. We were close by here, so I kept on just to take you by the hand, and to present monsieur to you, of whom you were speaking in such flattering terms when I met you at the King's on the same evening when——"

"Very well! very well! M. le Comte de la Fère, I believe?"

"Precisely."

"M. le Comte is welcome."

"And he will dine with you two, shall he not? while I must keep on the track like the poor bloodhound I am. You others are lucky mortals," he added, sighing as noisily as Porthos might have done.

"What! we are to lose you?" resumed the worthy governor.

"I must leave you for an hour or so. I will be back for dessert."

"You are really coming back?" asked Athos, in a tone of doubt.

"Most certainly," he replied with a confidential grasp of the hand, and he added in a lower tone:

"Wait for me, Athos; be as gay as possible, and above all things, do not talk of serious matters, for the love of Heaven!"

A renewed pressure of the hand enjoined on the count the need of impenetrable discretion.

Baisemeaux waited upon D'Artagnan to the door, while Aramis, with his most caressing manner, took possession of Athos, resolved to make him speak out; but Athos had all the virtues in a supreme degree. If necessity had required it, he could have been the finest orator in the world, or if occasion demanded he could have died without a word upon his lips. The three gentlemen seated themselves ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure at a table amply supplied with every gastronomic luxury. But it is not over these personages that we must now linger; we will abandon them to their own reflections over the remnants of fish, fowl, and game, carved by Baisemeaux's liberal knife; and we will set out upon the track of D'Artagnan, who, re-entering the coach which had brought him, cried in the coachman's ear, "To the King! and burn the pavement!"

CHAPTER XII

M. de Saint-Aignan had executed the commission with which the King had entrusted him for La Vallière, as we have seen in a preceding chapter; but with all his eloquence he was not able to persuade the young girl that she had a sufficient protector in the King, and that she stood in need of no other friend on earth so long as his Majesty took her part.

In fact, upon the first word uttered by the confidant as to the discovery of the famous secret Louise broke out into tears and sobs, and abandoned herself to an excess of grief which the King would not have found flattering to himself if he had chanced to be a witness of it. Saint-Aignan, his ambassador, resented it, as his master might have done, and returned at once to the King to announce what he had seen and heard. It is there that we now find him, greatly agitated, in presence of Louis, who was more agitated still.

"But," said the King to the courtier when the latter had finished his narration, "what has she decided? Shall I at least have a glimpse of her before supper? Will she come here, or must I go to her?"

"I am persuaded, Sire, that if your Majesty desires to see her, you must not only take the first steps, but go the whole way."

The King rose, crimson with vexation; jealousy was now devouring him in its turn. Saint-Aignan was beginning to find the situation beyond him, when suddenly the curtain of the door was drawn aside. The King started, his first thought being that a note had come to him from La Vallière; but in place of the messenger of love he saw only his captain of musketeers standing silent in the doorway.

"M. d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed; "well, what is it?"

D'Artagnan glanced at Saint-Aignan; the King's eyes followed the same direction as his captain's. These glances would have spoken plainly to any one, all the more to a courtier like Saint-Aignan. He bowed and withdrew, leaving the King and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" asked the King.

"Yes, Sire," replied the captain of musketeers, in a solemn voice, "it is done!"

"What did the count have to say?"

"He said that he was expecting to be arrested, Sire."

The King raised his head proudly.

"I trust that M. le Comte de la Fère does not persevere in his rôle of rebel?"

"In the first place, Sire, what do you call a rebel?" asked the musketeer, quietly. "Is a man a rebel, in the eyes of the King, who not only lets himself be flung into the Bastille, but who actually resists those who are unwilling to conduct him there?"

"Who are unwilling to conduct him there?" cried the King. "What am I to understand by that, captain? Are you mad?"

"I think not, Sire."

"But it was you to whom I gave the commission," cried the King. "And you dare to tell me that in spite of my order it was your intention not to arrest the man who had insulted me?"

"That was absolutely my intention, Sire."

"Oh!"

"I even proposed to him to mount a horse which I had waiting for him at the Barrier of the Conférence. It was to enable M. le Comte de la Fère to reach Havre, and thence to sail for England."

"You would have betrayed me, then, monsieur?" cried the King, with a flash of ferocious pride.

"Sire——"

"M. d'Artagnan, I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, Sire. I have come to have myself arrested, too."

"To have yourself arrested? you?"

"Doubtless. My friend will be very much bored yonder, and I have come to propose to your Majesty that you should permit me to keep him company. Let your Majesty speak the words, and I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the guards for that, you may be sure."

The King sprang toward the table and seized a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment.

"Take notice that it is to be perpetual, monsieur," he cried in a tone of menace.

"I count upon it, Sire, for when once you have done that fine stroke, you will hardly venture to look me in the face again."

The King flung his pen away with violence.

"D'Artagnan! you Gascon braggart! Who is King here, you or I?"

"You, Sire, unluckily."

"If you were King, you would doubtless sanction M. d'Artagnan's rebellion, would you not?"

"Yes, doubtless, and I would say to my captain of musketeers," pursued D'Artagnan, "I would look at him with human eyes, not with flaming coals of fire, and I would say: 'M. d'Artagnan, I have forgotten that I was King, I have descended from my throne to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur," cried the King, "do you think to excuse your friend by surpassing him in insolence?"

"Oh! Sire, I shall go much farther than he," said D'Artagnan, "and you will not only have yourself to blame. I shall say: 'Sire, you sacrificed his son, and he defended that son; you then sacrificed the father; he spoke to you in the name of honour, religion, and virtue, you spurned him, drove him from you, imprisoned him.' I shall be sterner than he and I shall say: 'Sire, choose! will you have friends or lackeys, soldiers or cringing fops, strong men or puppets? Do you wish men to serve you or to bend their necks before you? Do you wish them to love you or to fear you? Make haste, Sire, and choose! Keep what is left to you of great nobles, you will always have enough courtiers. Make haste and send me to the Bastille with my friend, for if you could not listen to the Comte de la Fère, whose voice was the voice of gentleness and honour, if you cannot listen to D'Artagnan, who speaks with the rude, frank voice of sincerity, you are a bad king, and by to-morrow you will be a poor king. Now bad kings are abhorred, and poor kings are driven from their thrones." That is what I had to say to you, Sire. You were wrong in driving me to it."

The King fell back cold and rigid in his chair; it was evident that a thunderbolt, falling at his feet, could not have startled him more. D'Artagnan had said all that he had to say. Understanding the wrath of the King, he drew his sword, and, approaching Louis XIV, with due respect, laid it upon the table before him. But the King, with a gesture of fury, pushed the sword from him, so that it fell to the floor, and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet.

Master of himself as the musketeer was, he turned livid in his turn, and, boiling with indignation, cried out: "A king may disgrace a soldier, he may exile him, he may sentence him to death, but were he a hundred times a king he has not the right to insult him by dishonouring his sword. Bethink you, Sire! This sullied blade can have no scabbard now except my heart or yours. I choose my own, Sire; thank God for it, and for my forbearance!"

Then rushing upon his sword: "My blood be upon your head, Sire!" he cried; and with a rapid movement he set the hilt to the ground, and directed the point towards his own

breast. But the King dashed forward with a movement still swifter than D'Artagnan's, flinging his right arm around the musketeer's neck, while with the left he seized the blade of the sword in the middle, and slipped it silent back into the scabbard. D'Artagnan, stiff, pale, and still trembling with rage, let the King do all without a motion on his own part. Then Louis, deeply moved, stepped back to the table, took his pen, wrote several lines, signed them, and held out his hand to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, Sire?" said the captain.

"An order to M. d'Artagnan to release M. le Comte de la Fère on the spot."

D'Artagnan seized the royal hand and pressed it to his lips. Then he folded the order, slipped it under his coat of buff, and left the room. Neither King nor captain had uttered a syllable.

"Oh, human heart! compass for kings to steer by!" murmured Louis, left alone; "when shall I learn to read your secret folds like the pages of a book? No, I am not a bad king; no, I am not a poor king; but alas! I am still a child."

CHAPTER XIII

D'Artagnan had promised M. de Baisemeaux to return in time for dessert, and he kept his word. Baisemeaux hastened to draw up another chair, D'Artagnan allowed his glass to be filled, and emptied it, both Athos and Aramis remarking meanwhile his emotion. Athos alone thought he had fathomed it. For him D'Artagnan's return, and above all the perturbation of this usually unruffled personage, seemed to say plainly: 'I have just asked the King something which his Majesty has refused me.' Convinced that he was right, Athos thereupon took upon himself to give an explanation of what was taking place.

"The truth is, my friends," said the Comte de la Fère, with a smile, "that you, Aramis, have been taking supper with a state criminal, and you, M. de Baisemeaux, with your prisoner."

"Consequently," said Baisemeaux, trembling at the thought of having supped so familiarly with a man who was in disgrace with his Majesty, "consequently, M. le Comte——"

"Consequently, my dear governor," said Athos, "my friend M. D'Artagnan will hand you that paper which is peeping out from his buff, and which is doubtless nothing less than the order for my detention."

Baisemeaux held out his hand with the readiness of long habit. D'Artagnan thereupon drew from his breast two papers, one of which he handed to the governor. Baisemeaux unfolded the paper, and read beneath his breath, pausing at intervals to look up at Athos:

"'Order to hold in confinement in my fortress in the Bastille'—very good—'in my fortress of the Bastille—M. le Comte de la Fère.' Oh! monsieur, what a painful honour it is for me to have you here!"

"You will have a patient prisoner, monsieur," said Athos, in his calm and gentle voice.

"And a prisoner who will not remain a month with you, my dear governor," said Aramis, while Baisemeaux, the order in his hand, was making an entry in his jail-book of the King's command.

"Not even a day, or, rather, not even a night," said D'Artagnan, exhibiting the King's second order, "for now, dear M. de Baisemeaux, you may proceed immediately to enter the order for setting the count at liberty."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, "that is an excellent piece of work which you have spared me, D'Artagnan;" and he pressed the musketeer's hand with meaning and that of Athos at the same time.

"What!" cried the latter in amazement, "the King has given me my liberty?"

"Ah! M. le Comte," said Baisemeaux, addressing Athos, "you little know what you have lost; I should have put you on thirty livres rations with the generals. What am I saying? —at fifty livres, rather, with the princes, and you would have supped every night as you have this evening."

"Permit me, monsieur," said Athos, "to prefer my mediocrity." Then turning to D'Artagnan:

"Let us go, my friend," he said.

"Let us go," echoed D'Artagnan.

"Am I to have the delight," asked Athos, "of having your company?"

"As far as the gate only, *très cher*," replied D'Artagnan, "after which I shall say to you as I said to the King: 'I am on duty.'"

"And you, my dear Aramis," pursued Athos, smiling, "will you bear me company? La Fère is on the road to Vannes."

"I, my friend, have an appointment," rejoined the prelate, "and I cannot leave without endangering important affairs."

"Then, my dear friend," said Athos, "permit me to embrace you and take my departure. Many thanks for your good will,

my dear M. de Baisemeaux, and above all for the specimen you have given me of the Bastille fare." Then, having embraced Aramis, and pressed M. de Baisemeaux's hand, and having received the parting good wishes of both, Athos went his way with D'Artagnan.

While the dénouement of the scene at the Palais-Royal was thus taking place in the Bastille, let us relate what was going on at the lodgings of Athos and of Bragelonne.

Grimaud, as we have seen, had been present when Athos quitted his apartment; he had seen D'Artagnan gnawing his moustache while his master got into the coach, he had studied both their faces, and he had known them both long enough to be sure, in spite of their impenetrable masks, that events of a serious nature were taking place.

Once Athos had gone he set himself to reflecting; he then recalled the strange fashion in which Athos had taken leave of him, the embarrassment, imperceptible to all but himself, which he had detected in his master, usually so clear of mind and firm of purpose. He knew that Athos had carried nothing away, save what he had upon him, and yet he felt convinced that Athos' absence was not to be that of an hour or even of a day. Something had spoken of a prolonged absence in the tone with which Athos had bidden Grimaud adieu.

Grimaud the faithful passed thus from anxiety to terror. Therefore Grimaud had recourse at once to heroic measures. He searched in the doublet which his master had left behind, and discovered a letter. This is what it contained:

> "Dear Friend: Raoul has been here to ask me for information in regard to Mademoiselle de la Valliere's conduct during our young friend's sojourn in England. I am only a poor captain of musketeers, whose ears are filled all day long with the gossip of the barracks and the ruelles. If I had told Raoul all that I believe I know, the poor boy would have died of it; but since I am engaged in the King's service I cannot prattle of the King's affairs. If your heart moves you to speak, now is the time. The matter concerns you more than me, and well-nigh as much as it concerns Raoul."

Grimaud tore out a handful of his hair. He would have done better if his locks had been more abundant. "There," he said, "is the key to this enigma. This young girl has been playing pranks. What they say of her and the King is true; our young master has been deceived, and he ought to know it.

M. le Comte went to see the King, and told him his mind, and then the King sent M. D'Artagnan to arrange the business. Oh, Lord!" continued Grimaud, "M. le Comte came back without his sword."

This discovery brought out a cold sweat on the worthy man's forehead. He did not linger to frame further conjectures, but pulled his hat over his eyes and ran to Raoul's lodgings.

After Louise's departure Raoul had mastered his grief, and was driven to look ahead along this perilous road where his folly and rebellion were dragging him. He saw at the first glance his father forced into direct opposition to the King, since Athos had been the first to expose himself to this danger. In this moment of sudden lucidity the unhappy young man recalled the mysterious signals made by Athos, and D'Artagnan's unexpected visit; and the inevitable result of such a conflict between prince and subject rose before his startled eyes. This thought made him spring to his feet. He girded on his sword and hastened at once to his father's dwelling; on the way he ran against Grimaud, who, starting from the opposite pole, was dashing out with the same ardour to discover the truth. These two fell into each other's arms; they had reached the same point in the parabola described by their imagination.

"Grimaud!" cried Raoul.

"M. Raoul!" cried Grimaud.

"I have an idea that M. d'Artagnan came to——"

"To arrest M. le Comte, you would say?"

"Yes, Grimaud."

"I could have sworn it!"

"What road did they take?"

"By the quays."

"Towards the Bastille?"

"Let us go first to M. d'Artagnan's; we shall perhaps learn something there."

"No, since they concealed this thing from me at my father's, they will conceal it everywhere. Let us go to—oh, Heavens! I must be out of my senses to-day, my good Grimaud."

"How so?"

"I forgot M. du Vallon."

"M. Porthos?"

"Who is still waiting for me! Alas, as I told you, I am losing my mind."

"Waiting for you? Where?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Good Lord! Luckily it is in the same direction as the Bastille."

"Let us hasten, then!"

"Monsieur, I will go and get the horses saddled."

"Yes, my friend, go."

CHAPTER XIV

When Porthos espied upon the road two riders in such hot haste he did not doubt that these were his men at last, and rising from the grass, where he was comfortably seated, he began to limber out his wrists and his knees, saying to himself as he did so:

"What a fine thing it is to have good habits! The fellow has come at last; and if I had gone away, and he had found no one here, he would have taken advantage."

Then he planted himself in a martial attitude, with his hand on his thigh, throwing out his broad chest, and displaying his gigantic height. But instead of Saint-Aignan he saw only Raoul, who hailed him with frantic gestures, crying:

"Pardon me, dear friend! Oh, pardon me! I have been desperate!"

"You have killed him?"

"Killed whom?"

"Saint-Aignan, of course."

"Oh, it matters little about Saint-Aignan."

"What has happened now?"

"This has happened: that the Comte de la Fère is probably under arrest at this moment."

"It is impossible," said Porthos.

"Do you understand that it is by order of the King he has been arrested?"

Porthos looked at the young man as if to say, "What does that matter to me?" This mute language seemed so eloquent to Raoul that he asked for nothing more. He remounted his horse, while Porthos, assisted by Grimaud, was doing the same.

"Let us first inquire at the Bastille," said Grimaud, who spoke seldom, but to the purpose.

They accordingly hastened to reach the fortress. By one of those strokes of luck which Heaven grants to men of resolute will, Grimaud suddenly caught sight of a coach just crossing the drawbridge at the main gate. A sudden dizziness prevented Raoul from distinguishing who were inside, but

Grimaud swore that he had seen two persons, and that his master was one of them.

They were not disappointed. Raoul, pistol in hand, fell upon the forward horse, and commanded the coachman to stand. In the meantime Porthos had seized the man in his arms and lifted him off the box. Grimaud was already holding open the door of the coach.

Raoul threw out his arms, crying:

"M. le Comte! M. le Comte!"

"Well, well, is that you, Raoul?" cried Athos, drunk with joy.

"We have followed you from the Bastille," said Raoul, in a tone of suspicion and reproach.

"Yes, we had been to supper with that worthy M. de Baisemeaux. You remember Baisemeaux, Porthos?"

"Pardieu! I should think so."

"Where is M. le Comte going?" asked Grimaud, whom his master had already rewarded by a smile.

"We are going home to Blois."

"Without baggage?"

"Oh, as to that, I thought to charge Raoul with sending mine after me, or bringing it with him if he returns home."

"If there is nothing to detain you longer in Paris," said D'Artagnan, with a look clear and piercing as steel, and as sharp as a sword-thrust, for it reopened the young man's wounds, "he would do well to follow you, Athos."

"I have nothing to keep me in Paris," said Raoul.

"Come, my son!" added the count, throwing his arm tenderly around Raoul's neck to draw him into the carriage; and still holding him in a close embrace, the count pursued:

"Grimaud, you can return quietly to Paris with your horse and M. du Vallon's; for Raoul and I will mount our horses here and leave the coach for these two gentlemen to return to Paris in; when you reach my lodgings you can pack up my clothes and papers and send them after us."

Athos then got out of the carriage and mounted the horse which Porthos had ridden and which seemed very thankful to exchange riders. They all embraced and interchanged many assurances of eternal friendship.

D'Artagnan rejoined Porthos in the coach.

"Well, dear friend," he said, "this has been a day indeed."

"So it has," replied Porthos.

"Your back must be well-nigh broken."

"Oh! not quite. I shall go to bed early to-night, however, in order to be ready for to-morrow."

"Ready for what?"

"Listen, then! Raoul did not fight his duel, so I must fight it for him!"

"What, with the King?" cried D'Artagnan, stupefied.

"I assure you that the quarrel is with M. de Saint-Aignan."

"That is what I meant. In fighting with that gentleman, you will be drawing your sword against the King."

"Ah, indeed!" cried Porthos, opening his eyes in amazement. "You are sure?"

"For I keep repeating to you that it is all one."

"Ah! very well then," said Porthos, relenting.

"You understand, do you not?"

"No, but that does not matter."

"No, it does not matter," replied D'Artagnan, "let us go to supper, Porthos."

CHAPTER XV

The reader has not forgotten that on leaving the Bastille, D'Artagnan and the Comte de la Fère left Aramis there, *tête-à-tête* with Baisemeaux. The latter could talk of nothing but the singular circumstance of Athos' incarceration, followed so promptly by the order to set him at liberty. Baisemeaux had also observed that both orders—that for the arrest and that for the release—were in the King's own hand. Now, the King did not trouble himself to write such orders himself, except in the most important cases. All this was very interesting, and above all very obscure to Baisemeaux, but since it was all perfectly clear to Aramis, he naturally did not attach the same importance to it as did the good governor.

Besides, Aramis rarely went out of his way for nothing, and he had not yet disclosed to M. de Baisemeaux for what cause he had taken this trouble now. So at the moment when Baisemeaux was in the midst of his dissertation, Aramis suddenly interrupted him.

"Tell me, dear M. de Baisemeaux," he said, "why you never have any other amusements at the Bastille than those in which I have shared during the two or three visits I have had the honour of paying you"

This apostrophe was so unlooked-for that the governor stopped in bewilderment like a weathercock that has suddenly received an impulsion contrary to that of the wind.

"Amusements?" he said. "Why, I have them continually, monseigneur."

"Visits, without doubt."

"Visits? Oh, no, visitors are not frequent at the Bastille."

"Even from your society?"

"What do you call my society?—my prisoners?"

"No, you do not understand me, my dear M. de Baisemeaux; you do not understand. I am not speaking of society in general, but of a particular society—of the society, in short, with which you are affiliated."

Baisemeaux almost let fall the glass of muscatel which he was raising to his lips.

"Affiliated?" he said; "affiliated?"

"Without doubt, affiliated," repeated Aramis, with the greatest nonchalance. "Are you not a member of a secret society, my dear M. de Baisemeaux? There is an engagement entered into by all governors and captains of fortresses belonging to the order."

Baisemeaux turned pale.

Aramis then spoke, or rather recited, the following paragraph as if he had been reading it out of a book:

"'The said captain or governor of a fortress will, upon the demand of a prisoner, and in case of need, permit the entrance of a confessor affiliated to this order.'"

He paused. Baisemeaux had turned so pale, and was trembling to such a degree, that it was painful to behold.

"Yes. Understand me, dear M. de Baisemeaux. They said to me, who sent me here: 'The said governor or captain will, in case of need, and on the demand of the prisoner, permit the entrance of a confessor affiliated to the order.' I came accordingly. I find that you do not understand what I am saying. I must therefore return to those who sent me and inform them that they are mistaken and that they must send me elsewhere."

"What! You are——?" cried Baisemeaux, gazing at Aramis, with something approaching terror.

"The confessor affiliated to the order," said Aramis, without the slightest change of tone.

But mild as were these words, they were like a thunderbolt to the poor governor. He turned livid, and it seemed to him as if Aramis' fine eyes were two fiery blades piercing his very heart.

"Monseigneur, I beseech you, have the goodness to listen to me."

"For what purpose?"

"Monseigneur, I do not say that I am not connected with the order——"

"Ah, ha!"

"But not having been warned," proceeded the poor man, "I was far from expecting——"

"Does not the Gospel say: 'Watch, therefore, for God alone knoweth the hour'? and do not the rules of the order say: 'Watch, for what I will, you must will always'? What pretext have you to offer for not expecting a confessor, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Because——"

"M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, leaning back in his chair, "here is your sergeant who wishes to speak to you."

And in fact a sergeant just then showed his head at the half-opened door.

"What is it now?" cried Baisemeaux; "cannot I be left for ten minutes in peace?"

"M. le Governor," said the sergeant, "the sick man in the second Bertaudière has sent word by his jailer to ask to see a confessor."

Baisemeaux nearly fell from his chair. "What must I answer?" he asked.

"Whatever you wish," replied Aramis, pursing his lips. "It is your concern. I am not the governor of the Bastille."

"Tell the prisoner," cried Baisemeaux eagerly, "that he shall have what he asks for." Thereupon the sergeant went out.

"Oh! monseigneur," murmured Baisemeaux. "How could I have suspected? How could I have foreseen?"

Aramis contented himself with nodding his head, as if to say: "That is well," and motioning with his hand, "Walk ahead." Baisemeaux set forward at once, and Aramis followed him.

At last they reached the door. Baisemeaux was preparing to enter, when, stopping at the threshold, Aramis said: "It is not written that the governor shall hear the prisoner's confession."

Baisemeaux bent his head and let Aramis pass; the latter, taking the lantern from the turnkey's hand, motioned to have the door closed behind him. For a moment he stood still, listening intently to make sure that Baisemeaux and the jailer had withdrawn; then, when their retreating footsteps assured him that they had left the tower, he set down the lantern on a table and looked about him.

Upon a bed covered with green serge, and resembling all the other beds in the Bastille except in being newer, screened by the heavy half-drawn curtains, lay a young man. According to the custom of the prison, the captive was without a light, having been obliged to extinguish his candle at the hour of curfew. It can be seen how highly this prisoner was

favoured, since he had the rare privilege of keeping a light until the curfew sounded.

He did not change his attitude upon the entrance of the visitor; he was either sleeping or waiting. Aramis lighted the candle by means of the lantern, gently pushed back the armchair, and approached the bed, with a visible blending of respect and interest.

The young man raised his head.

"What do you want with me?" he said.

"Did you not ask to see a confessor?"

The young man fixed his penetrating eyes upon Aramis' face and said:

"I thank you"; then after a moment's silence, he added, "I have seen you before."

Aramis bowed. Without doubt the prisoner's scrutiny, revealing as it did those evidences of a cold, wily, and dominating nature which were impressed on the Bishop of Vannes' countenance, had been far from reassuring to one in his situation, for he added:

"I am better."

"What then?" asked Aramis.

"Why, then, since I am better, I no longer need a confessor, it would seem."

"Nor even the haircloth shirt promised to you in the note which you found in your bread?"

The prisoner started, but before he could answer or deny:

"Not even," went on Aramis, "that confessor from whose lips you are to hear an important revelation?"

"If that be so," replied the young man, falling back upon his pillow, "it is a different matter. I am listening."

Aramis thereupon looked at him more attentively and was astonished at his air of easy, simple majesty which can never be acquired, unless God has put it into the blood and heart.

"I am your confessor."

"Yes."

"Well, then, as my penitent you owe it to me to speak the whole truth."

"I ask nothing better than to speak it!"

"Every prisoner has committed some crime which has caused his punishment. What crime have you committed?"

"If you wish me to tell you what crime I have committed, explain to me what a crime is. For since there is nothing within me that reproaches me, I affirm that I am not a criminal!"

"A man is sometimes a criminal in the eyes of the great

of this earth, not for having committed crimes, but for knowing what crimes have been committed."

The prisoner listened with close attention.

"Yes," he said, after a moment's silence, "I understand; yes, you are right, monsieur; it may have been in that way that I became a criminal in the eyes of the great."

"Ah! you know something then?" said Aramis, who thought he had discovered, if not the vulnerable point, at least the joint in the cuirass

"A man's secrets are his own, monsieur, and not at the mercy of the first comer."

"Very true," said Aramis bowing. "Very true! pardon me; but to-day, am I still the first comer for you? Answer me, I beseech you, *Monseigneur!*"

This title seemed to cause the prisoner a slight distress, yet he did not appear astonished at its being given him.

"I do not know you, monsieur," he said.

"Oh, if I dared, I would take your hand in mine, and I would kiss that hand."

The young man made a motion as if about to give his hand to Aramis; but the light which had flashed for a moment from his eyes faded out beneath the lids that drooped, and he drew back his hand in cold distrust.

Aramis rose. "Decidedly," he said, "I have nothing more to say to a man who distrusts me as you seem to do."

"And I," added the prisoner, in the same tone, "have nothing to say to a man who will not understand that a prisoner must distrust everyone."

"Even his old friends?" said Aramis. "Oh, that is too much prudence, monseigneur."

"My old friends? You are one of my old friends, then? You?"

"Do you remember, fifteen or eighteen years ago, seeing at Noisy-le-Sec a cavalier who rode with a lady—a lady who was usually clad in black silk and flame-coloured ribbons in her hair?"

"Yes," said the young man; "once I asked the name of this cavalier and was told that he was called the Abbé d'Herblay. I was amazed that this abbé should have such a martial air, and was told that there was nothing surprising in that since he had been one of the musketeers of King Louis XIII."

"Well!" said Aramis, "that former musketeer, then an abbé, afterwards Bishop of Vannes, and to-day your confessor, was I."

"I knew it. I had recognised you."

"Well, monseigneur, if you know that, I must add one thing more, which you do not know; that is, that if the presence here of this musketeer, of this abbè, of this bishop, of this confessor were known to the King—by this evening or to-morrow's dawn, he who has risked everything to come to you would see the headsman's axe gleaming from the depths of a dungeon far darker and more obscure than this of yours."

In listening to these words, firmly uttered, the youth had risen upon his bed and had plunged a more and more ardent gaze into Aramis' face. As a result of this scrutiny, the prisoner seemed to acquire greater confidence.

"Yes," he murmured; "yes, I remember perfectly. The lady of whom you speak came once with you, and twice more with——" Here he stopped.

"With the lady who came to see you every month, you mean, monseigneur?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who that lady was?"

A light seemed to flash from the prisoner's eye.

"I know that she was a lady of the court," he said.

"Do you remember this lady well?"

"Oh! my recollections on that subject cannot be very uncertain," replied the young prisoner. "I saw that lady once in company with a man of forty-five years or thereabouts. I saw her once with you, and with the lady in the black dress with flame-coloured ribbons; and I saw her twice afterwards with the same companion. These four persons, with my tutor and old Perronnette, my jailer, and the governor, are the only persons to whom I have ever spoken, and in truth almost the only persons I have ever seen."

"You were in prison then?"

"If I am in prison here, I was comparatively free there, although my liberty was very restrained; a house which I never left, a great garden surrounded by walls which I could not pass. Such was my dwelling; you know it, for you have been there. And I" (the young man looked at Aramis), "I am doomed to live always in the obscurity of a prison?"

"Alas, I believe so."

"And that," continued the young man, "because my presence in the world would reveal a great secret?"

"A great secret; yes."

"To have a child such as I was confined in the Bastille, my enemy must be very powerful."

"He is so."

"For my tutor and my nurse to have been carried off and

parted from me as they were, I must have been, or they must have been, a source of great danger to my enemy?"

"Yes, a danger from which your enemy saved himself by causing this gentleman and the nurse to disappear," answered Aramis, quietly.

"Disappear?" asked the prisoner. "In what manner did they disappear?"

"In the surest way," replied Aramis; "they are dead."

The young man turned slightly paler, and passed a trembling hand across his brow.

"By poison?" he asked.

"By poison."

"Oh, you have told me nothing new," said the prisoner, knitting his brows.

"How is that?"

"I suspected it."

"Speak, monseigneur. I have already told you that I am risking my life in speaking to you. However slight a thing my life may be, I beg you to receive it as a ransom for yours."

"Well, then," resumed the young man, "this is why I suspected that my nurse had been killed, and my tutor——"

"Whom you called your father."

"Yes, whom I called my father, but of whom I know myself not to be the son."

"How did you discover this?"

"Just as you are too respectful to be a friend, he was too respectful to be my father."

"I, for my part," said Aramis, "have nothing to disguise."

The young man bowed and went on:

"Doubtless I was not then destined to perpetual confinement, and what makes me sure of it now, as I look back, is the pains that were taken to make me an accomplished cavalier. The gentleman who had charge of me taught me all that he knew himself: mathematics, a little geometry and astronomy, fencing and horsemanship. Every morning I took fencing lessons in a hall on the ground floor, and rode about the garden. Well, one morning in summer, when the heat was great, I had fallen asleep in this lower hall. I was in this lower hall, then, and, tired out by my fencing lesson, had fallen asleep. My tutor was in his chamber on the first flight, directly above me. Suddenly I heard my tutor give a low cry, and then call, 'Perronnette! Perronnette!' That was my nurse."

"Yes, I know," said Aramis. "Go on, monseigneur, go on."

"She was undoubtedly in the garden, for my tutor

descended the staircase hurriedly. I rose, anxious at sight of his anxiety. He opened the door leading from the vestibule into the garden, still calling, 'Perronnette! Perronnette!' The windows of the lower hall looked out upon the courtyard; the blinds were closed, but through an opening in one of the blinds I saw my tutor approach a large well, which was situated directly under the windows of his study. He bent over the edge, and gazed into the well, still calling, and making frantic gestures. From where I stood I could not only see, but hear plainly."

"Go on, monseigneur, I beg you," said Aramis.

"Dame Perronnette ran up at the tutor's cries. He took her by the hand, drew her to the well, and bending over it with her, cried: 'Look, Look! What a misfortune.' 'Come, come, calm yourself,' said Dame Perronnette. 'What has happened?' 'That letter,' cried my tutor. 'Do you see that letter?' and he pointed down the well.

"'What letter?' asked the nurse.

"'That letter which you see down there is my last letter from the Queen.'

"At that word I started. Why should my tutor—he who passed for my father, he who was constantly enjoining modesty and humility upon me—be in correspondence with the Queen?

"'What are the odds?' said Dame Perronnette, 'if the letter is at the bottom of the well it is the same as if it were burnt; and since the Queen herself burns her letters every time she comes here——'

"'Oh! the Queen will never believe in such an accident,' said the poor man, shaking his head; 'she will think I wish to keep this letter, instead of returning it to her as I have done all the others, in order to use it as a weapon against her. She is so distrustful, and M. de Mazarin so—— that Italian fiend is capable of having us imprisoned on the slightest suspicion.'"

Aramis smiled with an imperceptible nod.

"'You know, Dame Perronnette, they are both so suspicious in regard to Philippe.'

"Philippe is the name they gave me," interrupted the prisoner.

"'Very well, then, there must be no hesitation. Some one must go down the well,' said Dame Perronnette.

"'So be it! But will not whoever goes down the well suspect the importance of a paper for which we are willing to risk a man's life? However, you have given me an idea, Dame Perronnette; yes, some one shall go down the well, and it shall be myself.'

"But at this proposition Dame Perronnette cried out in con-

sternation, and implored him with tears to do nothing of the kind, so that at last he promised her to go in search of a ladder long enough to reach down the well, while she was to hasten to the farm and secure a daring boy who could be made to believe that a jewel had fallen into the well, wrapped up in a sheet of paper; and since the paper, remarked my tutor, would open in the water, it would not be surprising that the jewel should have dropped ou

"'By that time the writing may be effaced,' said Dame Perronnette.

"'That matters little, if we can secure the letter. For if we return that to the Queen, she will see that we have not betrayed her, and consequently not having aroused M. de Mazarin's suspicions, we shall have nothing to fear from him.'

"Having come to this decision, they separated. They had no sooner closed the door than, without stopping to cross the vestibule, I jumped out of the window and ran to the well. Then, without knowing what I did, holding the rope with a wet piece of cloth over my hands, I swung down into the abyss. I reached the water, and dived once, holding to the rope with one hand while I stretched out the other and caught hold of the precious paper, which tore in two in my grasp. I hid the two fragments in my doublet, and aiding myself with my feet against the sides of the well, and hanging by my hands, I drew myself up, agile and vigorous as I was, and above all in desperate haste, and thus reached the margin again. This I flooded as I touched it with the water which was pouring from me in streams. Once outside the well with my capture, I ran in the sun to the end of the garden, whence I plunged into the woods where I meant to hide myself.

"Just as I had set foot in my hiding-place, the bell which hung over the great gate rang. It was my tutor returning. I was just in time.

"I reckoned that I had still ten minutes before he could reach me, even if he came straight after me—twenty minutes if he lost time searching for me. That was enough to read this precious letter, which I hastened to piece together. The writing was already beginning to disappear; still I managed to decipher it."

"And what did you read there, monseigneur?" asked Aramis, with keen interest.

"Enough to convince me, monsieur, that my tutor was a nobleman, that Perronnette, without being a great lady, was something above a servant, and in short that I myself was of no mean lineage, since the Queen, Anne of Austria, and the

prime minister, Mazarin, deigned to recommend me with such care."

The young man ceased, greatly moved.

"And what happened then?" asked Aramis.

"This happened, monsieur," he replied, "that the labourer, summoned by my tutor, found nothing in the well, after searching thoroughly. It also happened that I was seized with a high fever caused by the chill of the water and the excitement of my discovery, and that this fever was succeeded by delirium, in which I told everything; in consequence my tutor, guided by my own avowal, found under my pillow the torn fragments of the Queen's letter."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, "I understand all at last."

"From that time on all is conjecture. Doubtless the poor gentleman and the poor woman, not daring to keep secret all that had taken place, wrote everything to the Queen, and sent her the torn letter."

"After which," said Aramis, "you were arrested and brought to the Bastille."

"As you see."

"Then your two servants disappeared?"

"I think I have said enough," replied the prisoner. "It is your turn now; I am weary."

"I will obey you," said Aramis.

Thereupon he bethought himself a moment, and a shade of deep solemnity spread itself over his face. It was apparent that a critical moment had arrived for the part which he had come to play in the prison.

"One question first," said Aramis.

"What is it? Speak!"

"In the house where you dwelt, was there a glass or mirror?"

"What are these words, and what do they mean? I do not even know them."

"We call a glass or mirror an article of furniture which reflects objects, which, for example, enable one to see one's own face as you see mine with the naked eye."

"No, there was no glass or mirror in the house," replied the young man.

Aramis looked about him. "And there is none here," he said; "the same precautions have been taken here as there."

"That is true," the youth answered.

"Listen, then, I will relate to you in a few words what has occurred in France during the last twenty-three or four years, that is to say, since the supposed date of your birth, and accordingly in the period most interesting to you."

"Speak!" and the youth resumed his serious and reflective attitude.

"You know that the last reigning monarch was Louis XIII?"

"I know it," replied the young man, flushing slightly.

"He had long been preoccupied with anxiety as to his succession. That is one of the burdens of princes, who must leave behind them on earth something more than a memory, in order that their great thoughts may live and their work be carried on."

"Did the King Louis XIII die without leaving children?" asked the prisoner, with a smile.

"No, but he was long deprived of the happiness of having a child of his own; for long years he believed that he should die without posterity, and this thought had reduced him to the depths of despair, when suddenly his wife, Anne of Austria, announced that she was about to be confined. His joy was great as these tidings and every wish was offered up for her happy delivery. At last on the 5th of September, 1638, she gave birth to a son."

Here Aramis looked at his companion and saw that he had turned pale.

"The Queen, as I was saying, gave birth to a son. But, after all, the court had hailed the news with shouts of joy, after the King had shown the new-born child to his people and to his nobles, while he was gayly seated at table celebrating the joyous event—at that moment the Queen, left alone in her chamber, felt the pains of childbirth once more, and brought into the world another son."

"Oh!" cried the prisoner, betraying a greater degree of knowledge than he had admitted before, "I thought that Monsieur was not born until——"

Aramis raised his finger.

"Wait, while I go on," he said.

The prisoner heaved an impatient sigh and waited.

"Yes," said Aramis, "the Queen had a second son whom Dame Perronnette, the midwife, received in her arms."

"Dame Perronnette!" murmured the young man.

"A messenger was sent in haste to the hall, where the King was dining, and warned him in a whisper of what had taken place. He arose from the table and hastened to the Queen's chamber; but it was not joy which his look expressed, rather something akin to terror. The birth of twin sons changed to bitterness the joy which had been caused by the birth of one, because (you doubtless were not aware of what I am about to tell you), because in France it is the oldest son who succeeds his father on the throne."

"I was aware of that."

"And doctors and jurists agree in holding it doubtful whether the son who is brought first into the world is really the elder by the law of God and nature."

The prisoner uttered a stifled cry and became whiter than the sheet beneath which he hid his face.

"You understand now," pursued Aramis, "that the King who with such feelings of joy had seen himself possessed of an heir, was plunged in despair on reflecting that he now had two; and that the one latest born and still unknown to the world might live to contest the rights of seniority with the other who had come into the world two hours earlier, and who, two hours earlier, had been recognised as the heir. Thus, this second son might come some day, armed with his own rights, and the adherence of a party, to sow discord and civil war in the kingdom, and thus destroy the dynasty instead of consolidating it."

"Oh, I understand, I understand!" murmured the young man.

"Well, this is what is related," said Aramis, "this is what is affirmed; this is why one of the sons of Anne of Austria, shamefully separated from his brother, kept in shameful confinement, hidden in the deepest obscurity—this is why that second son has disappeared, and disappeared so utterly that no one in France to-day is aware of his existence except—his mother!"

"Yes, his mother who has abandoned him!" cried the prisoner in accents of despair.

"Excepting also," continued Aramis, "the lady dressed in black, with flame-coloured ribbons, and excepting finally——"

"Excepting yourself, is it not so? You who have come to tell me all this, you who have come to awaken in my breast curiosity, hatred, ambition, and perhaps—who knows?—a thirst for vengeance; you, monsieur, who, if you are the man I await, the man promised me by that note, the man, in short, whom Heaven was to send to me, must have upon your person——"

"What?" asked Aramis.

"A likeness of King Louis XIV, who is now reigning on the throne of France."

"Here is the likeness," replied the bishop, handing the prisoner an exquisite miniature in enamel, representing a living image of Louis XIV in all his pride and beauty.

The prisoner seized the picture eagerly and fixed his gaze upon it as if he would devour it.

"And now, monseigneur," said Aramis, "here is a mirror!"

Aramis left the prisoner time to collect his thoughts.

"So high! so high!" murmured the youth, while he devoured with his eyes the likeness of Louis XIV and his own image reflected in the mirror.

"What think you?" said Aramis at last.

"I think that I am lost," replied the captive, "that the King will never forgive me."

"And I am asking myself," pursued the bishop, fixing upon the prisoner a glance instinct with meaning. "I am asking myself which of the two is king, the one represented by the portrait or the one reflected by the glass."

"The King," replied the young man, sadly, "is he who is seated on the throne; it is he who is not in prison, but he who puts others there. Royalty is power, and you see well that I am powerless."

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, with a respect which he had not yet shown, "the King may be he—heed well my words—who coming forth from his prison knows how to maintain himself upon the throne where his friends will seat him."

"Monsieur, do not tempt me!" said the prisoner, bitterly.

As Aramis was about to reply, the young man cried out suddenly, with a violence which betrayed the power of race:

"We speak of friends; but by what chance could I possess friends, I who am unknown, and who have nothing by which to win friends—neither freedom, money, nor power?"

"Yet it seems I have the honour to offer my services to your royal Highness."

"Oh, do not call me thus, monsieur! it is a mockery and a cruelty. Do not make me dream of aught beyond the walls of the prison which enclose me; let me go on cherishing, or at least enduring, my slavery and obscurity."

"I had forgotten to say to you, monseigneur, that if you will deign to let yourself be guided by me, if you will consent to become the most powerful prince on earth, you will serve the interests of all the friends whom I devote to your cause, and these friends are many."

"Explain yourself."

"Impossible! I will explain myself, I swear it before God who hears me, upon the day when I shall see you seated on the throne of France."

"But my brother?"

"You shall decide his fate. Do you pity him?"

"He who has left me to perish in a dungeon? No, I do not pity him!"

"So much the better!"

"He might so easily have come to me in this prison, have

taken me by the hand and said: 'My brother, God has created us to love, not to be at strife with each other. I have come to you. A ferocious prejudice has condemned you to perish in obscurity far from mankind, deprived of every joy. I wish to seat you beside me; I wish to gird you with our father's sword. Will you take advantage of your nearness to me to use force against me? Will you use this sword to shed my blood?' 'Oh, never,' I should have answered: 'I look upon you as my deliverer, I will revere you as my master, you have given me more than God ever gave me. Through you I am free, through you I have the right to love and to be loved in the world of the living.'"

"And you would have kept your word, monseigneur?"

"Yes, upon my life."

"Whereas now——?"

"Whereas now I feel that I have the guilty to punish——"

"Your royal Highness will always be free to do your will. You can pardon if it seems good to you after punishing."

"It is well; and now, do you know one thing, monsieur?"

"Speak, prince."

"It is that I will listen to you no further until we are outside the Bastille."

"I was about to say to your royal Highness that I should have the honour of seeing you but once more."

"When will that be?"

"The day when my prince leaves these black walls for ever."

"May God hear you! How will you give me notice?"

"By coming to release you."

"Yourself?"

"My prince, do not leave this chamber except with me; or, if you are forced to do so in my absence, remember that it is not my doing."

"So, not a word to any one whatever except to you?"

"Only to me."

Aramis bowed low. The prince held out his hand.

"Monsieur," he said, with an accent which came from the heart, "I have one last word to say to you: If you have come to me in order to destroy me; if you have been merely an instrument in the hands of my enemies; if there should result from our conference, in which you have sounded the depths of my heart, something worse for me than captivity—that is, death —may you be blessed even then, for you will have ended my sorrows and have brought me calm in place of the feverish tortures which have devoured me these eight long years."

"Monseigneur, wait before you judge me," said Aramis.

"I have said that I should bless and forgive you. If, on the other hand, you have come to give me back the place which God destined for me in the full sunshine of fortune and glory; if, thanks to you, I may live in the memory of mankind, and do honour to my race by illustrious deeds and by some services rendered to my people; if from the low degree where I languish I rise to the heights of honour, upheld by your generous hand, then, indeed, to you—whom I thank and bless—to you the half of my power and my glory! You will still be ill repaid, your share will still be unequal, for never can I bestow on you one-half the happiness you will have given me."

"Your royal Highness fills me with pride," said Aramis, "by assuming that it is I who have brought all this," and he knocked at once on the door.

The jailer hastened to open it, accompanied by Baisemeaux, who, devoured by anxiety and fear, had begun to listen in spite of himself at the chamber door.

Happily, neither of the interlocutors had forgotten to lower his voice, even in their most daring outbursts of passion.

"What a confession!" exclaimed the governor, attempting to laugh. "Who could have believed that a recluse, a man half-buried, could have committed so many and such lengthy sins?"

Aramis was silent. He was in haste to leave the Bastille where the secret that oppressed him seemed to double the weight of the heavy walls.

When they had reached Baisemeaux's rooms:

"Let us talk business, my dear governor," said Aramis.

"Alas!" replied Baisemeaux.

"You have to request my receipt for a hundred and fifty thousand livres?"

"And to pay the first instalment of one-third of that sum," sighed the poor governor, taking three steps in the direction of his iron chest.

"Here is your receipt," said Aramis.

"And here is the money," replied M. de Baisemeaux, with a threefold sigh.

"The order read merely that I was to give you a receipt for fifty thousand francs," said Aramis. "Nothing was said about my receiving money. Adieu, monsieur."

And he departed, leaving Baisemeaux suffocated with surprise and delight over this royal present, made in so grand a style by the extraordinary confessor of the Bastille.

CHAPTER XVI

Since the departure of Athos for Blois, Porthos and D'Artagnan were seldom together; one having had fatiguing service to perform for the King, while the other was engaged in extensive purchases of furniture, which he was proposing to take back to his country seat, and with the aid of which he was hoping to establish in his various residences something of that court luxury of which he had caught a dazzling glimpse in his visit to his Majesty.

D'Artagnan, always faithful, finding one morning that his service allowed him a little freedom, suddenly thought of Porthos, and feeling anxious at having heard nothing from him for a fortnight, proceeded towards his hotel, where he caught him just getting out of bed.

The worthy baron appeared pensive—more than pensive, melancholy, in fact. He was seated half clad on the edge of his bed, with his legs hanging, contemplating a great pile of garments which littered the floor with their fringes, galoons, and embroideries, and their clashing of inharmonious colours.

Porthos, dreamy and sad as the hare of La Fontaine, did not observe D'Artagnan's entrance, which was hidden from him, moreover, at the moment by the person of M. Mouston, whose corpulence—sufficient at any time to hide one man from another—was just now doubled by the voluminous folds of a scarlet cloak which the steward was exhibiting to his master, by holding it high in the air and turning it on all sides.

D'Artagnan was arrested on the threshold by the spectacle of Porthos in a reverie; then, as the sight of the numberless garments scattered over the floor drew deep sighs from the breast of the worthy gentleman, D'Artagnan thought it time to tear him from this painful contemplation. He therefore coughed to announce his presence.

"Ah!" cried Porthos, his face lighting up with joy; "ah! here is D'Artagnan! I shall now have an idea."

"Well, well! there seems to be sadness here," said D'Artagnan.

Porthos replied by a look expressive of extreme dejection.

"Well! what is the trouble, then?"

"The trouble is that I have received an invitation to the fête at Vaux," replied Porthos in a lugubrious tone.

"Well, well, that is nothing to complain of!"

"I have no clothes to wear."

D'Artagnan was petrified.

"No clothes, Porthos! no clothes!" he cried, "when I see more than fifty suits on the floor here."

"Fifty, yes, and not one that fits me."

"How so, not one that fits you? Are you not measured when you get a suit of clothes?"

"Oh, yes!" Mouston interposed, "but I have grown fat."

"*Parbleu!* it is quite evident.'

"Do you hear, imbecile!" cried Porthos, "it is quite evident."

"But still, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, growing slightly impatient, "I do not understand why your clothes do not fit you because Mouston has grown stout."

"I will explain it to you," said Porthos. "I was congratulating myself on seeing Mouston grow fat, and I even helped him as far as I could to acquire *embonpoint* by means of substantial food, hoping always that he would end by equalling me in circumference, so that he could be measured in my place."

"Ah! *corbeuf!*" cried D'Artagnan. "I understand at last, and so you could save yourself the time and the humiliation."

"And so," continued Porthos, "the rascal has gone on for the last two years, gaining eighteen inches in circumference, and so my last dozen coats are too large for me in regular procession, by from one foot to a foot and a half."

"But the others, those which were made when you were more nearly of the same size?"

"They are entirely out of fashion, my dear friend, so that if I were to put them on I should look as if I had just arrived from Siam and had been absent from court for years."

"I understand your predicament; you have how many new coats—thirty-six? and yet you have not one! Well, you must have a thirty-seventh made, and the other thirty-six will be for Mouston."

"Ah, monsieur!" cried Mouston, with a gratified air, "you have always been kind to me."

"*Parbleu!* do you think that idea did not occur to me too, or that the expense deterred me? Not at all; but it wants only two days to the fête at Vaux. I received the invitation yesterday, I ordered Mouston to post hither at once with my wardrobe, and I only discovered my misfortune this very morning. From now until the day after to-morrow there is not a tailor, at all in the mode, who will undertake to make me a suit."

"That is to say, a suit covered with gold, you mean?"

"Yes, I want gold all over it!"

"We will manage that. You will not start for three days yet.

The invitations are for Wednesday, and this is Sunday morning."

"That is true; but Aramis advised me to be at Vaux twenty-four hours beforehand."

"Hum! Aramis?"

"And when I think," cried Porthos, stamping the floor, "when I think that I shall have no clothes to wear, I could burst with rage. I should like to break something or to strangle somebody."

"Do not strangle anyone or break anything, Porthos; I shall arrange all that; put on one of your thirty-six suits and come with me to the tailor's."

"Bah! my footman has seen them all this morning."

"Even M. Percerin?"

"Who is M. Percerin?"

"He is the tailor to the King, *parbleu*!"

Porthos smiled with a conquering air.

"Let us go to the King's tailor, then," he said, "and since he measures the King, my faith! he may measure me!"

M. Percerin was nearly eighty years of age, yet he was still fresh, and at the same time so dry that the courtiers said he was actually brittle. His fortune and renown were great enough for M. le Prince, that king of fops, to take him by the arm when chattering over the fashions with him, and for those among the courtiers least eager in paying their bills, never to venture running behindhand in settling with him; for Maitre Percerin would make a suit the first time on credit, but never a second, if he were not paid for the first.

It was to the house of this great artist that D'Artagnan took the dejected Porthos; the latter was saying to his friend as they went along:

"Take care, my dear D'Artagnan, do not compromise the dignity of a man like myself with the arrogance of this Percerin, who is doubtless very impertinent, for I give you warning that if he is wanting in respect to me, I shall chastise him."

"Presented by me," replied D'Artagnan, "you have nothing to fear, dear friend; even if you were—what you are not."

"Very good!"

"Stop the carriage, Porthos, here we are!"

"And what are they doing, all these people?"

"Oh! it is easy to see, they are waiting their turn. We will get down, slip between the lackeys and pages, and enter the tailor's house; I answer for it, especially if you go first."

"Come on, then," said Porthos, and both alighting proceeded on foot towards M. Percerin's house. D'Artagnan, pushing Porthos before him, broke through the throng and

reached the counters behind which the tailor's assistants were striving their utmost to answer questions. Our captain of musketeers, a man of rapid and close observation, took it all in at a glance. But, having run over the group, his eye rested upon a man in front of him. This man, seated on a stool, scarcely showed his head above the counter which sheltered him. He was about forty years of age, with a pale face, a melancholy expression, and soft, luminous eyes. For the rest, his costume was simple and his hair so plainly dressed that unobservant customers might have taken him for a mere tailor's apprentice, bending over the board and carefully stitching cloth or velvet.

However, the man's head was too often in the air for his fingers to work very profitably. D'Artagnan was not duped, and he saw that if this man were at work it was certainly not upon cloth.

"Eh!" he cried, addressing him, "so you have become a tailor's boy, M. Molière!"

"Hush, M. d'Artagnan," replied the man, softly. "Hush, in Heaven's name, or I shall be recognised."

"Go on, go on, M. Molière! I understand the interest you find in this sort of thing and—I will not disturb you in your studies."

"I thank you."

"But upon one condition—that you will tell me where M. Percerin really is."

"Oh! willingly, he is in his private room, only——"

"Well, my dear M. Molière, you will go and tell him that I am here, will you not?"

"I?" cried Molière, like a dog whose bone is being snatched from him. "I leave my good place? Oh! M. d'Artagnan, how ill you are treating me!"

"If you do not at once let M. Percerin know that I am here, my dear M. Molière," said D'Artagnan, in a low voice, "I warn you of one thing, I shall never introduce you to my friend here."

Molière indicated Porthos by an imperceptible gesture.

"This gentleman, you mean?" he said.

"Yes."

Molière fixed upon Porthos one of those looks which search a man's brain and heart. The scrutiny, doubtless, seemed to him big with promise, for he rose immediately and proceeded into the adjoining chamber.

After the lapse of ten minutes or so, he reappeared and motioned to D'Artagnan from beneath the hangings. The latter hurried after him, dragging Porthos along through winding

corridors till they reached M. Percerin's room. The old man, with his sleeves rolled up, was laying in folds a beautiful piece of gold-flowered brocade, the better to bring out its lustre. On perceiving D'Artagnan he put the stuff aside and came forward to greet him, without rapture or even excessive courtesy, but civilly enough.

"M. le Capitaine, you will excuse me, I am sure, for I am engaged."

Percerin raised his head with the air of a man little used to being opposed, even in his caprices; but D'Artagnan paid no attention to the airs which the illustrious tailor of brocades was beginning to assume.

"My dear M. Percerin," he went on, "I have brought you a customer."

"I will wait upon monsieur," said Percerin, "but later."

"My friend," replied Porthos, sententiously, "we can always find time if we choose."

Percerin turned crimson, which, in an old man white with age, is a very bad sign.

"Faith," he said, "monsieur is quite at liberty to give his custom elsewhere."

"Come, come, Percerin!" interposed D'Artagnan, "you are not very accommodating to-day. But I will say one word which will bring you to your knees. Monsieur is not only a friend of mine, but a friend of M. Fouquet's."

"Ah, ah!" exclaimed the tailor, "that is another matter."

"My dear Percerin," said D'Artagnan, "you will make a suit for the baron. I ask you myself."

"I will not refuse you, M. le Capitaine."

"But that is not all. You will make it for him at once."

"Impossible before a week hence."

"Not so, dear M. Percerin, especially if I ask you," spoke a low voice in the doorway—a low-toned, yet metallic voice—which caused D'Artagnan to prick up his ears, for it was the voice of Aramis.

"M. d'Herblay!" cried the tailor.

"Aramis!" muttered D'Artagnan.

"Ah, our bishop!" exclaimed Porthos.

"Good day, D'Artagnan; good day, Porthos; good day, dear friends!" said Aramis. "Come, come, dear M. Percerin; make the baron's suit, and I promise you that in doing so you will be pleasing M. Fouquet," and he accompanied these words with a gesture which said, "Consent, and dismiss them." It appeared that Aramis had a greater influence over M. Percerin than D'Artagnan even, for the tailor bowed in token of assent, and turning to Porthos:

"Go and have your measure taken on the other side," he said rudely.

Porthos coloured in a formidable manner.

D'Artagnan saw the storm coming, and addressing Molière in an undertone said:

"My dear monsieur, the man whom you see before you considers himself degraded if any one presumes to measure the flesh and bones which Heaven has bestowed on him. Study the type, Master Aristophanes, and make your profit out of it."

Molière did not need encouragement. He was devouring Baron Porthos with his eyes.

"Monsieur," he said to him, "if you will be pleased to come with me, I shall see that you are measured without the measurer's touching you."

"But how the devil do you manage it?" exclaimed Porthos, enchanted.

"Monsieur," said Molière, bowing, "if you will deign to follow me, you shall see."

Aramis was observing this scene with all his eyes. As Molière and Porthos disappeared, D'Artagnan drew near the Bishop of Vannes—a proceeding which seemed particularly to annoy the latter.

"You are having a suit made also, dear friend?"

"No; I was intending——"

"Oh, you had something private to say to Percerin? Why did you not tell me so at once?"

"Something private?" repeated Aramis. "Yes, certainly, but not from you, D'Artagnan. Never, I beg you to believe me, could I have anything so private to say that a friend like you might not hear it."

"Oh! no, no, I shall retire," insisted D'Artagnan, but in a tone of evident curiosity; for Aramis' embarrassment, however well-disguised, had not escaped him; and he was aware that in this impenetrable mind everything, however apparently futile, tended towards a given end—an unknown end, but one which from the knowledge he had of his friend's character, the musketeer knew to be of the highest importance.

Aramis, who on his side saw that D'Artagnan had his suspicions, insisted the more.

"Stay! I entreat you," he said; "this is what it is." Then turning to the tailor: "My good Percerin——" he continued, "I am, in fact, particularly glad you are here, D'Artagnan."

"Oh, indeed," rejoined the Gascon, even less duped this time than before. Percerin did not move; Aramis aroused him violently by snatching from his hands the brocade over which he was lost in contemplation.

"My dear Percerin," he said, "I have M. le Brun here, one of M. Fouquet's painters."

"Ah, very good!" thought D'Artagnan; "but why Le Brun?"

"Come in, M. le Brun, come in!" said Aramis, opening a side door with his right hand, while with the left he held D'Artagnan back.

"Faith! I understand nothing of this," said Percerin.

Aramis took his cue, as they say on the stage, then went on:

"My dear M. Percerin, you are making five costumes for the King, are you not? one of brocade, one in hunting cloth, one in velvet, one in satin, and one of a Florentine stuff?"

"You know everything, monseigneur?"

"Yes, and a great deal more besides," murmured D'Artagnan.

"But," cried the tailor in triumph, "what you do not know, monseigneur, prince of the church though you are—what no one will know beforehand besides the King, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and myself—is the colour of the stuffs, and the style of ornament—it is the cut, the ensemble, the effect of the whole thing!"

"Precisely! and that is what I have come to ask you to tell me, my dear M. Percerin," said Aramis. "Dear monsieur, M. le Brun requires the clothes you are making for the King."

Percerin gave a backward leap of horror, which D'Artagnan, calm and measured as he habitually was, did not regard as excessive, in view of Aramis' strange and startling proposition.

"The King's garments! That I should give to any one in this world the King's garments! Oh! this time, monseigneur, your Grace is certainly mad!" cried the poor tailor, driven to extremities.

"Come to my assistance, D'Artagnan," pursued Aramis, more and more calm and smiling; "help me to persuade monsieur, for you doubtless understand me."

"Eh, eh! Not too well I must admit."

"What, my friend! You do not understand that M. Fouquet wishes to give the King the delightful surprise of finding his portrait at Vaux on his arrival; and that the portrait, which will be a striking likeness, must be dressed precisely as the King will be on the day the portrait first sees the light."

"Oh! yes, yes," cried the musketeer, well-nigh convinced, so plausible was Aramis' reasoning. "Yes, you are right; the idea is an ingenious one. I will wager that it is your own, Aramis."

"I hardly know," replied the prelate, carelessly; "mine or

M. Fouquet's." Then scanning Percerin's face, after having noticed D'Artagnan's indecision:

"Well, M. Percerin," he inquired, "what do you say to it? Let us hear."

"I say that——"

"That you are at liberty to refuse, doubtless. I am well aware of it, and have no intention of constraining you, my dear monsieur. I will go further, and say that I appreciate your delicacy in not wishing to forestall M. Fouquet's wish. You dread appearing to flatter the King. A noble spirit, M. Percerin! A noble spirit!"

The tailor could only stammer something.

"It would, in truth, be a superb flattery to offer the young prince," went on Aramis. "But as M. le Surintendant said to me: 'If Percerin should refuse it will not lower him in the least in my opinion, and I shall always esteem him highly. Only——'"

"Only?" echoed Percerin, with anxiety.

"'Only,'" pursued Aramis, "'I shall be obliged to say to the King' (you understand, my dear M. Percerin, that these are M. Fouquet's words), 'only I shall be forced to say to the King: "Sire, it was my intention to present your Majesty a likeness of yourself, but through a feeling of delicacy, exaggerated, perhaps, but creditable, M. Percerin opposed it."'"

"Opposed it!" cried the tailor, in consternation at the responsibility thrown upon him. "I oppose anything which M. Fouquet desires, when it is a question of pleasing the King! Oh, what an ugly word you have uttered, monseigneur! Oppose! It is not I who said it, thank Heaven! I take M. le Capitaine to witness. Is it true, M. d'Artagnan, that I have opposed anything?"

D'Artagnan made a gesture intimating that he preferred to remain neutral. He felt that there was some intrigue beneath all this, whether comedy or tragedy. He cursed himself inwardly for not being able to fathom it, but in the meantime he wished to keep clear of the matter.

But already Percerin, goaded by the idea of the King being told that he had opposed an agreeable surprise intended for his Majesty, had drawn up a chair for Le Brun, and was busy taking down from a wardrobe four magnificent costumes, the fifth being still in the workmen's hands; and these masterpieces he fitted upon four lay figures brought to France in the time of Concini, and given to Percerin II by Maréchal d'Ancre after the discomfiture of the Italian tailors.

The painter set about drawing the figures, and then pro-

ceeded to colour them; but Aramis, who was following with his eyes every phase of the work, suddenly stopped him.

"I fear you have not caught the tone, my dear M. le Brun; your colours deceive you, and we shall not get on canvas that perfect resemblance which is indispensible; you need time to study the various tints more closely."

"That is true," said Percerin, "but time is lacking, and you will acknowledge, monseigneur, that I cannot help that."

"Then the affair will be a failure," said Aramis, tranquilly, "and that owing to want of truth in the colours."

Nevertheless Le Brun went on copying the stuffs and ornaments with absolute fidelity—a proceeding which Aramis saw with ill-concealed impatience.

"Come, come, what devil of an imbroglio are they playing here?" the musketeer went on asking himself.

"Evidently this will never do!" said Aramis. "M. le Brun, you may as well close your paint-box and roll up your canvas."

"For that matter, monsieur," cried the painter, in vexation, "the light is abominable here."

"An idea! M. le Brun, an idea! If we had a sample of the stuffs, for example, and you could take time and have a better light——"

"Oh, then," cried Le Brun, "I would answer for the result."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan to himself. "This must be the key to the whole performance. They want a sample of each of the stuffs, *Mordioux!* Will this Percerin give it to them?"

Meanwhile Percerin, beaten in his last stronghold, a dupe besides, of Aramis, feigned good nature, cut off five samples and handed them to the bishop of Vannes.

Le Brun packed away his paints, Percerin hung the suit in the wardrobe again, Aramis felt in his pocket to make sure that the samples were safe, and they all left the room.

They found Porthos in the adjoining chamber; no longer an irritated, disappointing Porthos, however, but a radiant blooming, charming Porthos, engaged in a friendly chat with Molière, who was gazing at him with a sort of idolatry, like a man who not only had never seen his better, but had never seen his equal.

Aramis turned to Molière.

"Come, then, dear M. Molière," he said, "if you are quite done with M. du Vallon."

"We have finished," replied Porthos.

"And are you satisfied?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Perfectly satisfied," assented Porthos.

Molière then took leave of Porthos, with profuse salutations, and grasped the hand which the musketeer held out to him furtively.

"Monsieur," concluded Porthos, simpering, "be punctual, above all, I beg of you."

"You shall have your suit by to-morrow, M. le Baron," replied Molière, and he departed with Aramis; whereupon D'Artagnan, taking Porthos by the arm, asked him:

"What has this tailor done to you, my dear Porthos, to make you so enchanted with him?"

"My friend, he has succeeded in doing what no tailor ever did before; he has taken my measures without touching me."

"Ah, bah! tell me all about it."

"'Monsieur,' he said to me," went on Porthos, "'a gentleman ought to measure himself; oblige me by drawing near to this mirror.' So I drew near the mirror. I must admit that I did not know what this precisely good M. Volière wanted of me——"

"Molière."

"Yes, Molière, exactly! You will see, my friend, that henceforth I shall remember his name only too well. This worthy M. Molière then began to trace lines on the mirror with a piece of Spanish chalk, following the shape of my arms and my shoulders, and all the while expounding this maxim: 'a coat should never incommode the wearer.'"

"That is certainly a fine maxim," remarked D'Artagnan, "but one which is not always put in practice."

"You have said the word, dear friend. During this time, Volière——"

"Molière."

"Look you, my friend! I decidedly prefer to call him—what did you say was his other name?"

"Poquelin."

"This Coquelin, then, was sketching my arm on the mirror——"

"Pardon me—Poquelin."

"What did I say?"

"You said Coquelin."

"Ah! so I did. Well, this Poquelin was sketching my arm on the glass, but he was taking his time about it; he looked at me frequently; the truth is that I presented a fine appearance. 'Does this tire you?' he asked. 'A little,' I replied, stooping slightly at the thighs; 'but I could hold out an hour longer.' 'No, no, I will not permit it!' he cried;

'we have some willing lads here who will make it their duty to hold up your arms, as they held up those of the prophets of old when they were invoking the Lord.' 'Very good!' I replied. 'That will not humiliate you?' 'My friend,' I said to him, 'there is a great difference, it seems to me, between being supported and being measured.'"

"A very sensible distinction," interposed D'Artagnan.

"Thereupon," proceeded Porthos, "he made a sign, and two lads approached: one held up my right arm, while the other, with infinite address, supported my left arm. 'A third boy!' he cried; a third approached. 'Support monsieur at the waist,' he said. This boy held me up at the waist."

"And so you rested?" said D'Artagnan.

"Perfectly, and Poquenard drew me on the glass."

"Poquelin, my friend."

"Poquelin, you are right—— Hold! I decidedly prefer to call him Volière."

"Do so, then, and let us be done with it."

"During all this time Volière was drawing me on the mirror."

"'Twas very polite in him."

"I liked his method much. It is respectful, and puts every one in his place."

"That is true," replied D'Artagnan, who added to himself, "Faith! unless I am much mistaken, this is a godsend which I have put in the way of that rascal of a Molière, and we shall certainly see the scene hit off to the life in some comedy or other."

Porthos was smiling.

"It appears that I am the very first who has ever been measured after that fashion."

"Well, my dear fellow, that does not surprise me on Molière's part," said D'Artagnan. "He is an intelligent fellow, whom you have inspired with a new idea."

"And he will make use of it in future, I am sure."

"Make use of it, indeed? I should think so. He will make use, and great use, of it. For, look you, my friend, of all our tailors, Molière is the one who best dresses out our barons, our counts, and our marquises, according to their true measure."

Upon this speech, of which we will discuss neither the appropriateness nor the depth of meaning, D'Artagnan and Porthos went out together from Maître Percerin's, and got into their coach. We will leave them there, if it so pleases

the reader, and follow Molière and Aramis to Saint-Mandé.

The Bishop of Vannes, much concerned at having encountered D'Artagnan at M. Percerin's, returned in a very ill humour. Molière, on the other hand, was highly elated over the clever rough sketch he had just made, and the fact that he knew where to put his hand upon the original, whenever he wished to turn his sketch into a finished picture; he arrived therefore in his most joyous mood. They found the whole first floor of the left wing occupied by these Epicureans, who were of the greatest vogue in Paris, and the most intimate frequenters of the house, each busy in his own department, like bees in their cells, in producing their sweetest honey for the regal cake, which M. Fouquet proposed to offer to his Majesty Louis XIV during the fête at Vaux.

Pélisson, his head buried in his hands, was laying the foundations of the prologue to "*Les Fâcheux*," a comedy in three acts, which was to be presented by Poquelin de Molière, as D'Artagnan called him, or Coquelin de Volière, as he was styled by Porthos.

Loret, in all the artlessness of his profession as a journalist —journalists having been artless in every age—Loret was drawing up a narrative of the fêtes at Vaux, before these fêtes had taken place. La Fontaine was straying about amongst the others, like a wandering spirit, troublesome, absent-minded, insupportable, whispering and humming in the ear of each a thousand poetic absurdities.

At this moment the Bishop of Vannes appeared, carrying under his arm a roll of plans and parchments. As if the angel of death had frozen all gay and sprightly fancies, as if this face had frightened away the Graces to whom Xenocrates offered sacrifices, thus silence fell at once over the study, and each one resumed his composure and his pen.

Aramis distributed the notes of invitation to the company, and thanked them in behalf of M. Fouquet. The superintendent, he said, being detained in his cabinet by business, could not come to see them, but begged them to send him some specimens of their day's work, to help him forget the weariness of his night's work.

At these words all bent their brows. Even La Fontaine seated himself at a table and sent his pen flying over a sheet of vellum; Pélisson made a fair copy of his prologue; Molière contributed fifty fresh verses with which his visit to Percerin had inspired him; Loret produced his article upon the marvellous fêtes which he prophesied, and Aramis, laden with spoils like the king of the bees, that great black drone, decked with

purple and gold, returned to his apartment, silent and full of business; but before retiring he said:

"Will not some one come with me? I am going through Paris, after passing a quarter of an hour with M. Fouquet I offer a seat in my coach."

"Good! I accept," said Molière, "I am in haste."

Aramis went out laughing, as he knew how to laugh; Molière followed him to order the horses while Aramis was exchanging a few final words with the superintendent.

"Oh, how they laugh up there!" said Fouquet, sighing.

"And you do not laugh, monseigneur? Have I not assured you that this was my affair?"

"Yes, you promised me millions."

"You shall have them on the day following the King's entrance at Vaux."

Fouquet looked searchingly at Aramis, and passed his icy hand across his damp brow. Aramis perceived that the superintendent either mistrusted him or doubted his power to procure the money.

How could Fouquet suppose it possible that a poor bishop, ex-abbé, ex-musketeer, could command such a sum?

"Why do you doubt me?" asked Aramis.

"My dear M. d'Herblay," replied Fouquet, "if I fall——"

"Well, if you fall——"

"I shall at least fall from such a height that I shall be crushed in the fall." Then tossing his head as if to escape from himself: "Whence come you, dear friend?" he said.

"From Paris—from Percerin's."

"And for what purpose did you go yourself to Percerin's? I do not imagine that you attach such great importance to the costumes of our poets."

"No, I went there to order a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yes, for you to offer to the King."

"Will it be a costly one?"

"Oh, it will cost merely a hundred pistoles, which you will give Le Brun."

"A painting? ah, so much the better! And what is this painting to represent?"

"I will tell you that later."

Fouquet grasped his hand. "And where are you going now?" he said.

"I am about to start for Paris, as soon as you have given me a letter."

"A letter to whom?"

"To M. de Lyonne."

"And what do you want with Lyonne?"

"I wish him to sign a *lettre de cachet*."

"A *lettre de cachet*? You wish to send some one to the Bastille?"

"No, quite the contrary. I wish to let some one out."

"Ah, and who is that?"

"A poor devil—a youth, a child in fact, who was thrown into the Bastille ten years ago for a couple of Latin verses he wrote against the Jesuits."

"A couple of Latin verses! and for writing Latin verses the wretched boy has been in prison for ten years?"

"Yes."

"What is his name?"

"Seldon."

"Ah, this is too much! and you knew this horror and never told me?"

"It was only yesterday that his mother appealed to me, monseigneur."

"And is this woman poor?"

"In the deepest misery."

"Oh, God!" cried Fouquet. "Thou dost at times permit such injustice to be done on earth, that we can understand how unhappy men may doubt Thy existence! Here, M. d'Herblay!" and taking up his pen Fouquet wrote a few hurried lines to his colleague, Lyonne.

Aramis took the letter and was about to go. "Stay!" said Fouquet, and opening his drawer he took out from it ten treasury notes, each for a thousand livres.

"Here," he said, "set the son at liberty and give the mother these; but, above all, do not let her know——"

"What, monseigneur?"

"That she is ten thousand livres richer than I. She would say I am but a wretched superintendent! Go, and I hope that God will bless those who are mindful of His poor"

"So I hope, also," replied Aramis, as he bent and kissed Fouquet's hand. And he went out rapidly, carrying with him the letter to Lyonne and the treasury notes for Seldon's mother, and picking up Molière, who was beginning to wax impatient.

CHAPTER XVII

Seven o'clock sounded from the great clock of the Bastille, that famous clock, which, like all the accessories of the prison of state, whose office was to torture, recalled to the prisoners the passing of each hour of their long agony. It was the supper hour of the governor, and as he was entertaining a guest this evening, the spit was loaded more heavily than usual. Baisemeaux, seated at the table, was rubbing his hands as he looked at the Bishop of Vannes, who, booted, like a cavalier, dressed in grey, and with a sword at his side, kept talking of his excessive hunger, and showing the liveliest impatience.

M. de Baisemeaux de Montlezun was not accustomed to familiarity on the part of his Grace my Lord of Vannes; and this evening Aramis was in a sprightly mood, and poured forth confidence upon confidence. The prelate had put on a touch of the musketeer; the bishop, unbent to the verge of jollity. As for M. Baisemeaux, with the facility of vulgar natures, he gave himself free rein in response to this partial unbending on the part of his guest.

"Do you realise," said M. de Baisemeaux, "that you are going to be very lonely now, since the Comte de la Fère has rejoined his penates at Blois? He is a very old friend, is he not?"

"You know it as well as I, Baisemeaux, since you were with us in the musketeers."

"Bah! with my friends I count neither bottles nor years."

"Baisemeaux, make me drunk to-night. Let us hold revel as we used to do, and if I have a trouble in the depths of my heart, I promise you that you shall see it as plainly as you could see a diamond in the bottom of your glass."

"Bravo!" cried Baisemeaux, and he poured out a great draught of wine and tossed it off with trembling delight at the thought of sharing in the deadly sins of an archbishop. While he was drinking, he did not notice with what attention Aramis was listening to the noises in the court-yard. A messenger rode in about eight o'clock, just as the fifth bottle was being brought in by François, but though the messenger made a great noise, Baisemeaux heard nothing.

"The devil take him!" said Aramis.

"Who? What?" demanded Baisemeaux. "I hope you

do not mean the wine you are drinking, nor him you are drinking it with."

"No, it is a horseman who is making noise enough in the court for a whole squadron."

"Good! some messenger," replied the governor, redoubling his bumpers. "Yes, the devil take him; and so fast that we shall have no more of him. Hurrah! hurrah!"

"Take care!" said Aramis, "take care!"

"Of what, dear M. d'Herblay?" said Baisemeaux, already half drunk.

"The letters brought by couriers to the governor of a fortress are sometimes orders——"

"Oh! perhaps you are right!" stammered Baisemeaux. "An order from the King is sacred of course. But these orders that come while one is at supper—I repeat, may the devil——"

"If you had acted thus with the great cardinal, eh? my dear Baisemeaux, and the order had turned out an important one——"

"Let then send up this order of the King's," said Baisemeaux, drawing himself up. "It is their business to write and torment me when I am at peace, to disturb me when I am happy," he added, bowing to Aramis. "Let us leave them to their business, then."

"And do you do yours," added the bishop, smiling, and yet with a piercing glance which was a command though accompanied by a caress.

Francois re-entered and Baisemeaux took from his hands the order of the ministry; he unsealed it deliberately and read it in the same way. Aramis feigned to drink in order to watch his host through the glass. Having finished reading, Baisemeaux said:

"An order of release. I ask you now if that is not a pretty matter to disturb us for!"

"Will you let me see it," asked M. d'Herblay, "if it would not be indiscreet?"

"Oh! not at all. Read for yourself."

"There is 'urgent' on the sheet; you noticed that, did you not?"

"Oh, admirable! 'Urgent'—a fellow who has been here for ten years! They are in great haste to let him out to-day, this very evening at eight o'clock!" and Baisemeaux, shrugging his shoulders with an air of high disdain, threw the order on the table and began eating again.

"They have these sudden impulses," he went on, with his mouth full; "they seize a man one fine day, they feed him up for ten years or so and write to you: 'Watch this rascal well!' or 'Keep him strictly!' and then all at once, when you have got to looking upon the prisoner as a very dangerous man, suddenly, without cause or precedent, they write: 'Set him at liberty,' and add to their missive 'urgent!' You will admit, monseigneur, that it is enough to make a man shrug his shoulders."

"Well, what is to be done? One protests like that and then one executes the order," said Aramis.

"And I shall obey strictly, too; and to-morrow morning at daybreak the prisoner shall be set free."

"To-morrow?"

"At daybreak."

"Why not to-night, since the *lettre de cachet* bears, both on the superscription and inside, 'urgent'?"

"Because to-night we are at supper, and that is urgent too."

"Dear Baisemeaux, booted though I am, I still feel myself a priest, and charity is to me a more imperious duty than eating and drinking, even. This unhappy prisoner has suffered long enough, since you have just told me that he has been our prisoner these ten years. Abridge this suffering, then! One happy moment is awaiting him; give it to him as speedily as possible. God will repay you in paradise with years of felicity."

"Let it be as you desire, then—only your supper will be cold."

"Oh! do not heed that."

Baisemeaux leaned back to ring for François, and in doing so he very naturally turned towards the door. The order was still upon the table. Aramis took advantage of the instant when Baisemeaux was not looking to change the paper for another, folded in the same manner, which he drew from his pocket.

"François," said the governor, "send the major up here with the turnkey of the Bertaudière." François bowed, and went out, leaving the host and his guest once more alone.

A brief silence followed, during which Aramis never took his eyes off the governor. The latter seemed only half-decided in disturbing himself in the midst of his supper, and was evidently trying to find some reason, good or bad, for delaying at least until after dessert. All at once he appeared to have hit upon a pretext.

"Eh!" he cried, "it is quite impossible. It is out of the

question, setting a prisoner at liberty at this hour of the night. Where can he go—a perfect stranger in Paris?"

"I have my coach here. I will set him down wherever he wishes to be taken."

"You have an answer for everything. François, let the major be ordered to open the cell of M. Seldon, No. 3 Bertaudière."

"Seldon!" exclaimed Aramis, quite simply. "I think you said Seldon?"

"I said Seldon, certainly. It is the name of the man to be released."

"Oh! you mean Marchiali," said Aramis.

"Marchiali, indeed! No, no. Seldon."

"I think you are making a mistake, M. Baisemeaux."

"I read the order."

"So did I!"

"And I read 'Seldon' in letters as large as that." Here Baisemeaux held up one finger.

"And I read 'Marchiali' in letters as large as this." And Aramis held up two fingers.

"Let us settle the matter, then," said Baisemeaux, sure of his point. "The paper is here; we have only to read it."

"I can read 'Marchiali,'" repeated Aramis, unfolding the paper. "Look!"

Baisemeaux looked, and his arms dropped to his sides.

"Yes, yes!" he cried, astonished. "It is certainly written there 'Marchiali.' It is quite true!"

"Ah!"

"What? The man we talk about so much! The man whom they are constantly recommending me to look after!"

"It says 'Marchiali,'" repeated the inflexible Aramis.

"The order is signed to deliver Marchiali," repeated Baisemeaux, mechanically, like a man striving to recover his wits.

"And you are going to release him at once? If your heart prompts you to set Seldon free at the same time, I assure you that I shall not oppose it the least in the world."

Aramis punctuated this remark with a smile, the irony of which sobered Baisemeaux completely, and restored his courage.

"Monseigneur," he said, "this Marchiali is that very same prisoner whom a priest, a confessor of our order, came to visit in such a secret and imperious manner the other day."

"I know nothing of that, monsieur," replied the bishop.

"Yet it was not so very long ago, dear M. d'Herblay."

"That is true. But with us, monsieur, it is best that the man of to-day should know nothing of what was done by the man of yesterday."

"In any case," said Baisemeaux, "the Jesuit confessor's visit seems to have brought this man good fortune."

Aramis made no reply, but went on eating and drinking.

Baisemeaux, on his part, no longer touching the food upon the table, took up the order once more, and examined it closely in every way. This scrutiny, under ordinary circumstances, would have made the impatient Aramis flush to his ears, but now the Bishop of Vannes did not become so easily irritated, especially as he reflected how dangerous such irritation would be.

"Are you going to liberate Marchiali?" he asked. "Oh, what a mellow, fragrant sherry this is, my dear governor!"

"Monseigneur," replied Baisemeaux, "I shall liberate Marchiali when I have recalled the messenger who brought the order, and, above all, if, on examining him, I become convinced——"

"All orders are sealed and the contents are unknown to the messenger. You are familiar with the King's signature, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Is it not upon this order?"

"That is true, but it may be——"

"It may be forged, you mean."

"Such things have happened, monseigneur."

"You are right; and what of M. de Lyonne's signature?"

"I see that, too, upon the order; but just as the King's signature may be forged, by the same token M. de Lyonne's may be."

"You make giant strides in logic, M de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, "and your argument is irresistible. But upon what do you found your belief that these signatures are false?"

"Upon the absence of the signers. There is nothing to check His Majesty's signature, and M. de Lyonne is not here to tell me that he signed."

"Very well, M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis bending his eagle glance upon the governor, "I so frankly adopt your doubts and your fashion of clearing them up, that I shall take a pen, if you will hand me one."

Baisemeaux handed him a pen.

"And a sheet of white paper," added Aramis.

Baisemeaux gave him the paper.

"And I shall write you an order,—I who am here, incontestably present, am I not?—an order to which I am sure you will give credence, however incredulous you may be."

Baisemeaux turned pale before this icy assurance. It seemed to him that Aramis' voice, but now so gay and jovial, had turned sinister and funereal, that the wax candles were changed into sepulchral torches, and the wine glasses into chalices of blood.

Aramis took up the pen and began to write, while Baisemeaux in terror read over his shoulder.

"A.M.D.G." wrote the bishop, and drew a cross under these four letters, which signify *ad majorem Dei gloriam,* and proceeded:

"It is our pleasure that the order brought to M. de Baisemeaux de Montlezun, governor, in the King's name, of the fortress of the Bastille, shall be held by him good and valid, and be immediately put into execution.

(Signed) D'Herblay,
General of the Order, by the grace of God."

Baisemeaux was so struck with amazement that his features became contracted; his lips were parted, and his eyes fixed. He did not stir, nor articulate a sound. Nothing could be heard in that great chamber but the buzzing of a little fly, fluttering around the candles.

Aramis, without deigning even to glance at the man whom he had reduced to such a miserable state, drew from his pocket a small case of black wax; he sealed his letter, affixed to it a seal hanging at his breast beneath his doublet, and when this operation was complete he presented the missive, in perfect silence, to M. de Baisemeaux.

"Monseigneur, I shall never rally from such a blow as this. I who have laughed and joked with you! I who have treated you on a footing of equality!"

"Hush, old comrade, no more of that," replied the bishop, who felt how tightly the cord was strained, and how dangerous it would be to snap it; "let us each live our own life. To you my protection and friendship, to me your obedience. These two tributes faithfully paid, we can still be merry. In truth, Baisemeaux, you make mountains out of mole-hills. Remain quietly here, and have the prisoner brought before the authorities."

Baisemeaux obeyed; he called his lieutenant and gave him

an order, which the latter transmitted, quite unmoved, to those whom it concerned. Half an hour later a door was heard to close in the courtyard; it was the door of the dungeon which was giving up its prey to the free air of heaven. Aramis blew out all the candles which lighted the room, save one behind the door. This flickering light prevented the sight from fixing itself steadily upon any object. It multiplied the changing forms and shadows around by its wavering mobility.

Footsteps approached. "Go and meet your men," said Aramis to Baisemeaux.

The governor obeyed. The sergeant and turnkeys withdrew and Baisemeaux re-entered followed by a prisoner.

Aramis had placed himself in a shadow, where he could see without being seen. Baisemeaux, in an agitated voice, read to the young man the order setting him at liberty. The prisoner listened without making a sign or uttering a word.

"Do you swear, in accordance with regulations, added the governor, "never to reveal anything that you have seen or heard in the Bastille?"

The prisoner perceived a crucifix; he stretched out his hand and took the oath with his lips.

"Now, monsieur, you are free. Where do you intend to go?"

The prisoner turned his head as if seeking behind him for a protector upon whom he had a right to count.

Then it was that Aramis came out from the shadow: "I am here," he said, "to render you, monsieur, any service you may be pleased to ask of me."

The prisoner coloured slightly, and without hesitation went up to Aramis and passed his arm through the prelate's.

"God have you in His holy keeping!" he said, in a voice whose firmness startled the governor as much as the formula amazed him.

Aramis, pressing the governor's hand, said to him: "Does my order trouble you? Do you fear its being found here in case they should come to make a search?"

"I wish to keep it, monseigneur," replied Baisemeaux. "If they should find it here it will be a sure sign that I am lost, and in that case you will be my last and most powerful auxiliary."

"Being your accomplice, you would say," replied Aramis, shrugging his shoulders. "Adieu, Baisemeaux."

The horses were waiting, making the coach shake in their impatience to be off. Baisemeaux conducted the bishop to

the foot of the steps. Aramis made his companion enter the coach first, then got in after him, and without giving the coachman any further order, "Go!" he said.

The coach rolled noisily over the pavement of the courtyard; an officer carrying a torch walked in front of the horses and gave, at each guard-house, the order to let them pass. During the time consumed in opening the successive gates, Aramis hardly breathed, and you could have heard his heart beating against his ribs. The prisoner, meanwhile, buried in a corner of the coach, gave no sign of life.

At last a jolt, more violent than the rest, announced that the last moat was crossed. Behind the coach closed the last gate, that of the Rue Saint-Antoine. No more walls to the right or the left. Everywhere the open sky, life and liberty.

The horses, held in check by a vigorous hand, went at a gentle pace as far as the middle of the Faubourg; there they broke into a trot.

Little by little, whether they were warming up to their work, or whether they were urged on, they increased in speed, and by the time they reached Bercy, the coach seemed to fly, such was the ardour of the steeds. Thus they reached Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, where relays were in waiting. Thence four horses instead of two bore the carriage in the direction of Melun, and halted for a moment in the midst of the forest of Sénart. The order doubtless had been given beforehand to the postillion, for Aramis was not even obliged to make a sign.

"What is the matter?" asked the prisoner, as if awakening from a deep dream.

"The matter is, monseigneur," said Aramis, "that before going further, your royal Highness and I must have a little talk together."

"I will wait for an opportunity, monsieur," replied the young prince.

"The opportunity could not be better, monseigneur; here we are in the midst of a forest, where no one can hear us."

"What of the postillion?"

"The postillion of this relay is deaf and dumb, monseigneur."

"I am at your service, M. d'Herblay."

Aramis made a sign to the deaf mute by touching him lightly, and he thereupon dismounted, and taking the leaders by the bridle, led them over the soft heath and mossy turf of a winding alley, in the depths of which, on this moonless night, the shadows hid them beneath a curtain blacker than ink.

That done, the man lay down upon a sloping bank beside

his horses, which nibbled right and left at the young oak shoots.

"I am listening," said the young prince to Aramis, "but what are you doing there?"

"I am disarming myself of my pistols, which we no longer need, monseigneur."

CHAPTER XVIII

The darkness was intense, and fell like a vast opaque curtain from the summits of the interlacing boughs.

The coach with its wide roof would not have admitted the smallest gleam of light, even if some luminous ray had stolen through the impenetrable blackness which filled this forest path.

"Monseigneur," resumed Aramis, "you know the history of the government which is now ruling France. The King has suffered, he resents it, and he will be avenged. He will be a bad king. I do not say that he will spill the blood of his subjects, like Louis XI, or Charles IX, for he has no mortal injuries to avenge; but he will devour his subjects' wealth and substance, because he has suffered in his own substance and possessions. A just and all-seeing Providence required an instrument, at once penetrating, persevering, and full of conviction to accomplish a great work. I am that instrument; I have acuteness, I have penetration, I have deep conviction; I govern a mysterious people, which has taken as its device God's device: *Patiens quia æternus!*"

The prince started.

"I divine, monseigneur, that you are raising your head in amazement on hearing of this people which I command. You did not know that you were treating with a king. Oh! monseigneur, king of a very humble, of a disinherited people—humble since they have no power save while creeping; disinherited, since never—almost never in this world——do my people reap the harvests they have sown, or eat of the fruits they cultivate. My people work for an abstraction, they heap together all the atoms of their power to form one man, and with the sweat of their brow they wreathe a misty halo for this man to wear, which his genius must transform into an aureole, gilded with the rays of all the crowns in Christendom. This man you have beside you, monseigneur. He has drawn you from the abyss for a great purpose, and to carry out this

sublime purpose, he wishes to raise you above all the powers of earth, above himself."

"Tell me plainly, monsieur—tell me without disguise—what I am to-day and what you intend that I shall be to-morrow."

"You are the son of King Louis XIII; you are the brother of King Louis XIV; you are the natural and legitimate heir to the crown of France. By keeping you beside him, as he kept Monsieur, your younger brother, the King would have reserved to himself his rights as legitimate sovereign. God alone and the doctors could have disputed his legitimacy. But the doctors always prefer the king who is to the king who is not. God has willed that you should be persecuted, and it is this persecution which to-day consecrates you King of France. He has bestowed on you the same features, height, age, and voice as your brother, and the very causes that led to your persecution will now lead to your triumphal resurrection. To-morrow, after to-morrow, at any moment, you may seat yourself—a royal phantom, the living shadow of Louis XIV—upon his throne, whence the will of God, confided for execution to the arm of man, will have precipitated him without hope of return."

"You know this secret; you have made use of it in my behalf. Who else knows it?"

"The Queen mother and Madame de Chevreuse."

"What will they do?"

"Nothing, unless you wish it."

"How can that be?"

"How will they recognise you, if you act in such a manner that you cannot be recognised?"

"That is true, but there are serious difficulties in the way."

"What are they, prince?"

"My brother is married; I cannot take my brother's wife."

"I will bring it about that Spain shall consent to the Queen's repudiation. It will be in the interest of your new policy as well as of human morality. All that is really noble and really useful in this world would be benefited thereby."

"But my brother in his confinement will speak."

"To whom will he speak? Can the walls hear him?"

"You mean by walls the men in whom you put confidence?"

"If need be, yes, your royal Highness, and moreover—the designs of Providence do not stop half-way. Every far-reaching plan like this is as sure in its results as a mathematical problem. The King in prison will not be as embarrassing to you as you were to him upon his throne Heaven

has given him a soul haughty and impatient by nature; and has moreover enfeebled and disarmed him by habits of luxury and the exercise of supreme power. He has thus prepared him, body and soul, for a brief agony. Thrown into prison as you were, obscure, a prey of doubts, leaving nothing behind you, and with the habits of a rigorous life, you could endure it; but your brother a captive, in bonds, forgotten of all, will not long survive the affront. God will recall his soul in His own time—and that will be soon.

"And yet there is an obstacle, monsieur, a very serious, an insurmountable, danger which you forgot."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis.

"There is the conscience that cries out, there is the remorse that tears the heart."

"Yes, that is true," replied the bishop; "there is weakness of purpose, as you remind me. Yes, you are right, it is indeed an immense obstacle. The horse which fears the ditch leaps into it and is killed! The man who crosses swords with another with trembling hand leaves loop-holes to the enemy's blade by which death enters. It is true! It is true!"

The young man sank into a silence so profound that the sound of his own breath became a tumult to Aramis.

"Monseigneur," he resumed, "I have not said all that I had to say to your royal Highness. I will not take you half-reluctant and cast you into the crucible of my own will, my own ambition. God is my witness that I desire to bring only happiness for you out of this ordeal to which you are being subjected! I know a canton in the Bas-Poitou of which no one in France suspects the existence. Twenty leagues—an immense extent of country, is it not?—twenty leagues, monseigneur, entirely covered with water, herbage, and reeds, and studded here and there with wooded islands. There you could live like a lord of ancient times, rich in the possession of your hunting-dogs, your fishing-lines, your guns, and your beautiful house of reeds; you could live on the produce of the chase, in full security. We can at once unharness two horses from this coach; the deaf mute, my servant, will conduct you by night marches, sleeping through the day, to the region I have told you of, and I shall have at least the satisfaction of saying to myself that I have rendered my prince the service he chose. In Poitou you will run no risks beyond that of catching fever, whereas, in playing that other game, the one you know, you run the chance of being assassinated on a throne or strangled in prison. On my soul! now that I have weighed them both—upon my life, I say!—I should hesitate."

"Monsieur," replied the young prince, "before deciding, let me alight from this coach, take a few steps on God's earth, and listen to the voice in which he speaks to us through nature. Give me ten minutes, and I will answer you."

"So be it, monseigneur," said Aramis, bowing respectfully, —so solemn and august had been the tone in which these words were spoken.

He dismounted before the young man and held the coach-door open for him. He saw him press his foot upon the mossy ground with a thrill that shook his whole frame, and his first few steps, on leaving the carriage, were hesitating, almost stumbling; it seemed as if the poor prisoner were unused to treading God's earth.

It was a terrible moment for the Bishop of Vannes; never had he found himself brought face to face with such a dire alternative. Was this soul of steel, accustomed to overcoming all obstacles, never finding itself inferior or vanquished, to be thwarted in so vast a scheme, merely through not having reckoned the influence wrought upon the human spirit by a few forest leaves bathed in the night air? This torture lasted throughout the ten minutes for which the young man had begged. During that eternity Philippe never ceased gazing up to Heaven with sad, tearful, suppliant eyes; Aramis never ceased gazing at Philippe with a burning, eager glance.

Suddenly the young man bowed his head; his thoughts returned to earth, his face hardened perceptibly, his brow became furrowed, his mouth assumed an expression of fierce courage. Once more his gaze grew fixed, but now it reflected the flame of earthly splendours; now it was like the look of Satan upon the high mountain, when he showed Christ all the kingdom of the earth and the glory thereof.

Aramis' eye became once more as gentle as it had been sombre.

Philippe, seizing his hand with a swift, nervous gesture, cried:

"Come, let us go where we shall find the crown of France!"

"Is that your decision, prince?"

Philippe did not even deign to answer; he looked the bishop in the face, resolutely, as if to ask him if it were possible for a man to go back upon a decision once made.

"Such looks as yours are strokes of fire which paint a character," said Aramis, bending over Philippe's hand. "You will be great, monseigneur, I answer for it."

"Explain to me how it will be brought about."

"First let me ask your royal Highness one question!"

"Speak!"

"I sent to your Highness a man in my service, to deliver to you a note-book containing instructions carefullly drawn up, in order to acquaint your Highness with all the persons composing your court."

"I have read all these notes."

"Attentively?"

"I know them by heart."

"You must beware of La Vallière's eyes," said Aramis. "She truly loves the actual King. It is difficult to deceive the eyes of a woman who loves."

"She is a blonde, with blue eyes whose tender glances will reveal her identity to me. She limps slightly; every day she writes me a letter, to which I reply through M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Do you know the latter?"

"As well as if I saw him before me. And I know his latest verses, as well as those I have composed in reply to them."

"Very good! and do you know your ministers?"

"Colbert, an ugly, dark-browed man, but full of intelligence; his hair growing low upon his forehead, a heavy massive head; the mortal enemy of M. Fouquet."

"As to Colbert, we need not concern ourselves."

"No, because, naturally, you will request me to exile him, will you not?"

Aramis, filled with admiration, contented himself with saying: "You will be very great, monseigneur."

"You see," added the prince, "that I have learnt my lesson thoroughly, and with Heaven's help and yours besides, I need not go wrong."

"There is still another pair of eyes which you will find troublesome, monseigneur."

"Yes, the captain of musketeers, M. d'Artagnan, your friend."

"D'Artagnan is a man to whom at a given moment I shall reveal all. But be on your guard, for if he should get on the track before that revelation, we shall both be slain or taken prisoners. He is a man of action."

"I will be on my guard. Tell me of M. Fouquet. What would you have me do with him?"

"Let him be superintendent as before, I beg of you."

"So be it! but he is now prime minister."

"Not quite that."

"A king as ignorant and perplexed as I will need a prime minister. You shall be my prime minister."

"It would be better," said Aramis, with a bow, "that I should be made prime minister only after your royal Highness has procured my nomination as cardinal."

"You shall be so two months from now, M. d'Herblay. But that is a small matter. Far from offending me by asking for something further, you would distress me by stopping there."

"I have indeed something further to hope for, monseigneur."

"What is it? Speak!"

"Yes, in truth," went on Aramis, quietly. "I shall have given you the throne of France, you shall give me the throne of St. Peter. When your firm, loyal mailed hand shall grasp the brother-hand of such a Pope as I shall be, neither Charles V, who ruled two-thirds of the habitable globe, nor yet Charlemagne, who ruled it all, shall reach to the height of your girdle. I have no alliances; I have no prejudices; I shall not drag you into persecutions of heretics; I shall not lead you into dynastic wars. I shall say: 'The universe between us, to me the souls, to you the bodies,' and as I shall die first, you will come into my heritage. What do you say to my scheme, monseigneur?"

"I say that you fill me with happiness and pride, M. d'Herblay, at the thought of merely comprehending you. Yes, you shall be a cardinal, you shall be my prime minister, and then you shall teach me what is to be done to secure your election as Pope, and I will do it. Ask of me any pledge."

"It is not needful. I shall never act without your being the gainer thereby. I shall never rise without placing you on the round of the ladder above me. I shall always hold myself far enough from you to escape your jealousy, near enough to watch over your advantage and maintain our friendship. All the contracts in the world are violated because the interests they cover incline more to one side or the other. But never shall it be so between us. I need no pledges."

"And so—my brother—will disappear?"

"Very simply. We will remove him from his bed by means of a plank which yields to the pressure of the finger. Having fallen asleep beneath a crown, he will awake in a prison. From that moment you will rule alone, and you will have no more urgent interest than that of keeping me beside you."

"That is true. Here is my hand, M. d'Herblay."

"Permit me to kneel before you, Sire, with all due respect. We will embrace each other on the day when we shall both wear upon our brows, you a crown, I a tiara."

"Embrace me now, to-day; and be more than great, more

than sagacious, more than sublime in genius; be good to me, be my father."

Aramis was nearly melted at these words. He felt something stirring in his heart, hitherto unknown to him, but this emotion soon died away.

"His father!" he thought. "Yes, his Holy Father."

And they reseated themselves in the coach, which sped rapidly along in the direction of Vaux-le-Vicomte.

CHAPTER XIX

The château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, situated about a league from Melun, had been built by Fouquet in 1653. This splendid mansion was now in readiness to receive "the greatest king on earth".

An army of servants was rushing in squadrons through the courts and vast corridors, while Fouquet, who had only arrived that morning, moved about with a calm, observant glance, giving his last orders, after his stewards had inspected everything.

Fouquet was descending the staircase, worn out with fatigue, when he caught sight of Aramis, who beckoned to him. The superintendent rejoined his friend, who was standing in front of a great picture not yet finished. The painter, Le Brun, still wrestling with his canvas, bathed in sweat, stained with his colours, pale with weariness and inspiration, was dashing on the final touches with his rapid brush. It was the portrait of the King, attired in that court suit which Percerin had condescended to show beforehand to the Bishop of Vannes.

Fouquet placed himself before this portrait which seemed to glow with life, in the freshness of its flesh-tints and its still moist colours. He gazed at the figure, calculated the labour it had cost, and in his new wonder over it, esteeming no reward worthy of such a herculean task, he threw his arms about the painter's neck and embraced him. The superintendent by this deed ruined a coat worth a thousand pistoles, but he revived Le Brun's spirits. It was a happy moment for the artist, but a painful one for M. Percerin, who was walking behind Fouquet, and who had also paused to admire in Le Brun's picture the suit he had made for his Majesty—a work of art, as he said, which had its equal only in M. Fouquet's wardrobe. His cry of distress was interrupted by the signal given from the roof of the mansion.

The sentinels of Vaux had perceived beyond Melun, in the open plain, the approaching *cortège* of the King and the Queens; his Majesty was just entering Melun with his long train of coaches and cavaliers.

Towards seven o'clock in the evening, without trumpets, without advanced guards, without outriders or musketeers, the King having galloped ahead with all his cavaliers, presented himself before the gate of Vaux, where Fouquet, being forewarned, had been waiting for half an hour bareheaded, and surrounded by his household and his friends.

M. Fouquet held the stirrup of the King, who, having dismounted, bowed graciously, and more graciously still held out his hand, which Fouquet, in spite of a slight resistance on the King's part, raised to his lips. The King wished to await in the outer court the arrival of the coaches, nor had he long to wait. The roads had been put in fine repair by the superintendent's orders, so that from Melun to Vaux there was hardly a stone to be found the size of an egg. Thus the coaches, rolling along as if over carpet, brought the two Queens and their ladies to Vaux by eight o'clock, without jolting or fatigue.

We will not describe the great banquet given to their Majesties, nor the concerts, nor the fairy-like masques. The supper over, the King did not wish to lose his walk. The park was brightly illuminated; the moon besides, as if she too were at the orders of the Lord of Vaux, was silvering the lakes and the tree-tops with her phosphorescent light. The air was balmy, the shadowy avenues were so smooth that they tempted the feet to tread them. The fête was now perfect, for the King, having met La Vallière at the turn of one of the woodland paths, was able to clasp her hand and say, "I love you," without being overheard—except by M. D'Artagnan, who followed him, and M. Fouquet, who preceded him.

The night of enchantments wore on. The King at last asked the way to his chamber, and immediately all were astir. The Queens retired to the sound of theorbos and flutes. As the King entered his magnificent chamber, a shudder passed through him. Fouquet asked him the cause.

"I am drowsy," replied Louis, somewhat pale.

"Does your Majesty wish for your attendants at once?"

"No, I have several persons to talk with first. Let M. Colbert be summoned."

Fouquet bowed and left the room.

Meanwhile D'Artagnan had not been wasting his time;

such indeed was not his habit. After inquiring for Aramis, he set out to search for him until he found him. D'Artagnan, having sent up his name, found the Bishop of Vannes in a beautiful chamber on the second floor, called the blue-room on account of its hangings; he was in company with Porthos and several of the modern Epicureans. Aramis came forward to embrace his friend, and offered him the best seat; as it soon became evident that the musketeer was reserving himself for a private talk with Aramis, the Epicureans took their leave. Porthos alone did not stir; it is true that having dined well, he was fast asleep in his chair, so that the *tête-à-tête* was not disturbed by his presence. Porthos had a deep sonorous snore which formed a harmonious bass accompaniment to the conversation.

D'Artagnan felt that it was for him to open it. The encounter he had come to seek was a rude one; he therefore entered frankly upon his subject.

"Do you know what idea occurred to me this evening at supper, Aramis?"

"No, tell me what it was, for I shall never be able to guess it; you have so many!"

"Well, the idea occurred to me that the true King of France is not Louis XIV."

"What?" cried Aramis, involuntarily, looking the musketeer full in the eyes.

"No, it is M. Fouquet."

Aramis breathed again and smiled.

"Ah! there you are, jealous like all the rest! The important thing is to keep in favour with the King."

D'Artagnan went straight to his friend, took him by both hands, and looking him full in the eyes: "Aramis," he said, "do you still love me a little?"

"Can you question it?"

"Good! Do me a service, then. Why did you take samples of the King's suit from Percerin?"

"Come with me, and ask poor Le Brun, who has been working over it for two days and nights."

"Do you believe in my instincts? You believed in them once. Well, an instinct tells me that you have some secret project on hand."

"I? A secret project?"

D'Artagnan shook his head with a look of melancholy.

"Oh, friendship, friendship!" he exclaimed, "hollow name! Here is a man who, if I asked it of him, would let himself be cut in pieces for me."

"That is true," said Aramis, nobly.

"And this man, who would shed every drop of blood in his veins for me, will not open me one little corner of his heart. Friendship, I repeat, is only a mockery and a delusion like everything bright in this world."

"Do not speak thus of our friendship," replied the bishop, in a tone of firm conviction. "It is not of the sort you are describing."

"Aramis, a voice speaks within me and enlightens me; that voice has never deceived me. You are conspiring against the King."

"Against the King!" cried the bishop, affecting displeasure.

"Your face will not convince me. Against the King, I repeat."

"Will you come to my assistance?" pursued Aramis, with his ironical laugh.

"Aramis, I will do more than assist you, I will do more than remain neutral, I will save you."

"You are mad, D'Artagnan."

"Aramis! Aramis! in mercy's name, one word, as a friend."

"A friend's word is truth. If I meditate raising a finger against the son of Anne of Austria, the true King of this realm of France, if it is not my firm intention to bow before his throne, if in my thoughts to-morrow is not destined to be the most glorious of days for my King, may God's lightning strike me! I am ready!"

Aramis had pronounced these words with his face turned toward the alcove of his chamber, in which D'Artagnan, who, moreover, had his back to the alcove, could not suspect that any one lay concealed. The unction, the studied deliberation with which these words were pronounced, the solemnity of the oath, afforded the musketeer the most complete satisfaction. He took both of Aramis' hands in his and pressed them warmly.

Aramis had supported his reproaches without turning pale, but he blushed before his praises. D'Artagnan deceived did him honour, but D'Artagnan confiding put him to shame.

"Are you going?" he said, embracing him to hide his confusion.

"Yes, my service calls me; I have to take the watchword for the night."

"Where are you to sleep?"

"In the King's antechamber, it seems. And Porthos?"

"Oh! take him with you; his snoring is like a cannonade."

"Ah! he does not share your room, then?"

"Not at all. He has an apartment of his own, I know not where."

"Very good!" said the musketeer, whose last suspicion was put to flight by this separation of the two associates. He touched Porthos roughly on the shoulder; the latter replied by a roar.

"Come!" said D'Artagnan.

"What! D'Artagnan, dear friend, it is you? By what lucky chance—— Oh; I remember, I am at the fête at Vaux."

"In your fine new suit!"

"Yes; it was very civil on the part of M. Coquelin de Volière, was it not?"

"Hush!" said Aramis, "you are treading heavily enough to break through the floor. The King's chamber has upon its ceiling all the soft delights of slumber. Do not forget that my floor is the lining to that ceiling. Good-night, friends, in ten minutes I shall be sound asleep."

And Aramis accompanied them to the door, smiling pleasantly. Then, no sooner were they outside the door than, bolting it rapidly behind them, and closing up all chinks in the windows, he called: "Monseigneur! Monseigneur!"

Philippe appeared from the alcove, pushing aside a sliding panel behind the bed.

"He was full of suspicion, your M. d'Artagnan," he said.

"Faithful as a dog; but he bites sometimes. If D'Artagnan does not recognise you before *the other* disappears, you may rely upon D'Artagnan to all eternity; for then, if he has seen nothing, he keeps his fidelity; if on the other hand, he sees too late, he is a Gascon and will never admit that he has been deceived."

"So I thought. What are we to do now?"

"You are to put yourself at your post of observation to watch the King at the moment of retiring, so that you may see how to perform that little ceremony."

"Very good! Where shall I place myself?"

"On this folding chair. I will slip aside a panel in the floor, and you can look through this opening, which corresponds with one of the false windows in the dome of the King's chamber. Can you see now?"

"I see the King," and Philippe started as at the sight of an enemy.

"What is he doing?"

"He is inviting some man to sit down beside him."

Aramis peered down through the opening in the floor. "It is Colbert," he said. "Oh, monseigneur, what are we about to hear, and what will be the results of this sudden intimacy?"

Louis XIV had sent for Colbert, and Colbert had arrived. The conversation between them had opened by one of the highest favours the King had ever accorded; it is true that he was alone with his subject.

"Colbert, be seated," he said. The intendant, overcome with delight, he who had been fearing a dismissal, refused this unprecedented honour.

"Does he accept?" asked Aramis.

"No, he remains standing."

"Let us listen, prince," and the future King and the future Pope hung eagerly upon the words of these mere mortals whom they held in their power and beneath their feet, to be crushed at their pleasure.

"Colbert," said the King, "you caused me great annoyance to-day."

"I ran the risk of displeasing your Majesty; but I did not risk concealing from you your Majesty's real interests."

"What! you feared something on my account?"

"I did, Sire, if it were nothing more than an indigestion," replied Colbert, "for a subject does not offer such a banquet to his King unless it be to smother him under a weight of good cheer."

"It is true," he said, "that M. Fouquet gave me too lavish a repast. Tell me, Colbert, where does he find the money necessary for his prodigious expenditures? Can you tell?"

"Yes, I know, Sire."

"You will be so good as to inform me, then."

"The dead speak sometimes, Sire. Read!"

"Ah!" murmured Aramis in the prince's ear, who was listening so intently as not to lose a syllable; "since you are here, monseigneur, to learn your trade of King, listen to this piece of truly royal infamy. You are about to witness a scene such as God alone, or rather the devil alone, can conceive and execute. Listen, then, and profit by it."

The prince redoubled his attention and saw Louis XIV take from Colbert's hand a letter which the latter held out to him.

"The late Cardinal's handwriting!" exclaimed the King

"Your Majesty has an excellent memory," replied Colbert, bowing, "and it is a marvellous gift for a King, destined to great tasks, to be able thus to recognise handwriting at a glance."

"I see that there is a question of money given to M. Fouquet."

"Thirteen millions—a considerable sum!"

"Most surely. But these thirteen millions must have caused a deficit in the accounts. How was such a deficit possible?"

"Possible! Perhaps not, but I assure you it was real."

"Do you know what results from all this, M. Colbert?" said the King, after a few moments' reflection.

"No, Sire, I do not know."

"It results that the misappropriation of these thirteen millions being once proved——"

"But it is so."

"I mean to say, being once declared, M. Colbert——"

"I think it might be so to-morrow, if your Majesty——"

"Were I not M. Fouquet's guest," rejoined the King, with dignity.

"The King is at home everywhere, and above all in houses which have been paid for with his money."

Louis XIV at last raised his eyes, and finding Colbert waiting for the next word:

"M. Colbert," he said, abruptly changing the conversation, "I see that it is growing late; I must to bed."

"Ah!" exclaimed Colbert, "I thought that——"

"Till to-morrow. In the morning I shall have come to a decision."

"Very good, Sire," returned Colbert, incensed, although he controlled himself in presence of the King.

The King made a gesture of dismissal and Colbert retired backwards to the door.

"My attendants!" cried the King.

The King's attendants entered the apartment. Philippe was about to quit his post of observation.

"A moment longer," said Aramis, with his accustomed gentleness of manner. "What has just taken place is merely a detail, and to-morrow we shall attach no importance to it; but the night service, the etiquette of the King's retiring, that, monseigneur, is of vital importance. Learn, learn how you must go to your bed. Look! Look!"

CHAPTER XX

History will tell us, or rather history has told us, of the events of the following day, of the splendid fêtes given by the superintendent to his King. All that day the King, evidently feeling the need of keeping off some dark thought that pursued him, sought the society of La Vallière as persistently as he fled from that of M. Colbert and M. Fouquet.

The evening came. The King had expressed a wish not to walk in the park until after cards, so between supper and the promenade they sat down to play. The King won a thousand pistoles, and having won them, put them in his pocket and rose, saying, "Gentlemen, to the park!"

He found the ladies already there. At the corner of one of the avenues, Colbert was waiting for him; doubtless the intendant was there by appointment, for the King, who had hitherto avoided him, now motioned him to approach, and they turned together towards the depths of the park.

But La Vallière had also observed the sombre brow and flaming eyes of the King, and as nothing which smouldered in his soul was impenetrable to her affection, she understood at once that this repressed wrath threatened someone. Agitated by this inward storm, which she had divined, she showed herself at first to the King with such an air of embarrassment that in his sombre mood the King interpreted it unfavourably.

Then as they were alone, or nearly so—for Colbert, on perceiving the young lady, had withdrawn respectfully a few paces—the King approached La Vallière, and took her by the hand.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "may I, without indiscretion, ask what troubles you? Your breast is heaving and your eyes are full of tears!"

"Oh, Sire! If, indeed, I am agitated and my eyes are wet, if I am sad, as you say, it is with the sadness of your Majesty."

"My sadness? Oh, you read me ill, mademoiselle. It is not sadness which is weighing upon me."

"What, then, is it, Sire?"

"Humiliation."

"Humiliation? Oh, what are you saying?"

"I say, mademoiselle, that where I am, none other should be master. Well, look about you, and see if—the King of France—is not eclipsed before the king of these domains!

Oh!" he continued, clinching his hands and teeth, "and when I think that this king——"

"What then?" said La Vallière, terrified.

"That this king is a faithless servant, who has grown proud on wealth stolen from me! But I will turn the fête of this insolent minister into mourning, which the nymph of Vaux, as his poets say, shall long remember."

"Alas! your Majesty——"

Louis XIV motioned Colbert to approach.

"Speak, M. Colbert," said the young prince, "for in truth I believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière here needs your word to confirm the word of the King. Tell mademoiselle what M. Fouquet has done, and you, mademoiselle, have the goodness to listen. Oh! it will not be long."

"Speak, monsieur," said La Vallière to Colbert, who had approached; "speak, since the King desires me to listen to you. Tell me what is the crime of which M. Fouquet is accused?"

"Oh, nothing very heinous, mademoiselle," he replied, with a lowering mien; "a mere abuse of confidence."

"Speak, speak, Colbert! and when you have told all, leave us, and go call M. d'Artagnan, for I have orders to give him."

"M. d'Artagnan!" cried la Vallière. "Why do you summon M. d'Artagnan, Sire? I implore you to tell me."

"*Pardieu!* to arrest this arrogant Titan, who, faithful to his device, threatens to scale my heaven!"

"Sire, you dishonour yourself by giving such an order."

"Dishonour myself!" muttered the King, turning white with wrath. "In truth, mademoiselle, you speak with a strange passion."

"My passion is not in words, Sire, but in serving your Majesty," replied the noble girl. "I would give my life for that end if it were needed, and with the same passion."

La Vallière was silent. In spite of himself the King could not withhold his admiration. He was vanquished by the warmth of her tones and the nobleness of her cause. Colbert, on his side, gave way overwhelmed by the inequality of the struggle. At last the King drew a deep breath, shook his head, and held out his hand to La Vallière.

"Mademoiselle," he said gently, "why do you pronounce against me? Do you know what this wretch will do if I allow him breathing space?"

"Heavens! Is he not a prey always within your reach?"

"And if he should escape? If he should take to flight?" cried Colbert.

"Then, monsieur, it will be for the King's eternal glory to have let M. Fouquet escape; and the guiltier he has been the greater the King's honour will show against that baseness—that shame."

Louis kissed La Vallière's hand as he fell on his knees before her.

"I am lost," thought Colbert; then suddenly his face brightened. "Oh, no, no! not yet," he said, within himself, and while the King, hidden beneath the covert of an enormous linden, clasped La Vallière to his breast with the ardour of ineffable love, Colbert quietly fumbled in his pocket-book, and drew forth a paper folded in the form of a letter, somewhat yellow, perhaps, but evidently very precious, since the intendant smiled as he looked at it. Then he turned his malevolent glance upon the charming group formed in the shadow by the figures of the young girl and the King, faintly lighted up by the glare of approaching torches.

Louis saw the torchlights reflected upon Louise's white dress. "Leave me, Louise," he said, "for some one is approaching."

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, some one is coming!" cried Colbert, in order to hasten the girl's departure.

Louise disappeared rapidly among the trees; then, as the King rose from where he had been kneeling:

"Ah! Mademoiselle de la Vallière has dropped something," said Colbert.

"What is it?" asked the King.

"A paper—a letter—something white. Look there, Sire."

The King stooped hastily and picked up the letter, crumpling it in his hand. At the same moment the torches arrived, flooding the darkness of the scene with sudden light.

These floods of light, the assiduities of this throng, this new attention on the part of Fouquet, came just in time to suspend the execution of a resolve which La Vallière had already shaken in the heart of Louis XIV. He was beginning to regard Fouquet with a sort of gratitude for having afforded La Vallière an occasion for revealing her generosity of soul, her power over his own heart. This was the moment for the crowning marvels of the night. Fouquet had barely time to conduct the King back to the château when a blaze of fire burst from the dome of Vaux, with a majestic thunder, and lighted up all the parterres of the garden as with the radiance of dawn. Suddenly, as the King was on the point of holding out his hand to Fouquet, he felt in his palm the crumpled paper which La Valliere in her flight had apparently let fall at his feet. That most powerful of magnets, a thought of

love, drew the young King back to the remembrance of his idol. By the light of the illumination, which still increased momentarily in beauty, and drew cries and shouts of admiration from all the villagers for miles around, the King read this letter, which he supposed to be a missive of love addressed by La Vallière to himself. But as he read, a deadly pallor overspread his face, and his look of deep-seated wrath, lighted up by these many-coloured fires, would have inspired terror in all, could they have read the heart torn by such stormy passions. This letter, dropped by Colbert at the King's feet, had been written by Fouquet in earlier days when the superintendent was making an attempt on La Vallière's heart. Fouquet saw the King's pallor without divining its cause; Colbert perceived his anger, and rejoiced at the approach of the storm. Fouquet's voice recalled the young prince from his fierce brooding:

"What ails you, Sire?" he asked, in his most gracious tones.

Louis made a violent effort to control himself, as he replied: "Nothing."

"I fear that your Majesty is suffering."

"I am suffering indeed, monsieur, but, as I have already told you, it is nothing," and without waiting for the end of the illumination the King turned towards the château. The morrow was the day fixed for his departure, and etiquette required that the guest should thank his host, and give him at least a word of civility in return for the expenditure of his thirteen millions. But the most gracious words which the King could find to say to Fouquet, as he took his leave of him, were these:

"M. Fouquet, you shall hear from me. Send M. d'Artagnan to me, I beg."

Five minutes later D'Artagnan, to whom the royal order had been transmitted, entered Louis XIV's chamber. Aramis and Philippe were in theirs, overhead, still listening, still eager and intent. The King did not wait for his captain of musketeers to approach his armchair; he hastened to meet him.

"Take care," he cried, "that no one enters here."

"Very good, Sire," replied the soldier, whose keen glance had for some time past analysed the ravages in the King's countenance. And, having given the order at the door, he returned to the King's side.

"Has anything occurred to disturb your Majesty?" he asked.

"How many men have you here?" demanded the King, without vouchsafing any reply to the other's question.

"I have the musketeers."

"How many men do you require to——"

"To do what, Sire?" inquired the musketeer, with wide, calm eyes.

"To arrest M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan fell back a step.

"What!" he cried. "Here is a man who has ruined himself in order to please you, and you wish to have him arrested. *Mordioux!* If my name were Fouquet, Sire, and they did that to me, I would swallow at a gulp ten of my own rockets and set fire to them and blow myself and every one else up to the sky. However, since you wish it, I go."

"Wait!" cried the King.

"Ah! what is it?"

"Guard M. Fouquet until to-morrow, when I shall have come to a decision."

"It shall be done, Sire."

D'Artagnan left the room. The King himself closed the door behind him, and began to pace furiously up and down the room like a wounded bull in the arena, who drags after him the coloured streamers and iron darts. At last he sought audible vent for his feelings.

"Ah, the miserable wretch! Not only does he plunder my finances, but with this stolen gold he corrupts my secretaries, friends, soldiers, artists—he even robs me of my mistress! Ah! that was why the faithless one defended him so bravely! It was gratitude—or, who knows?—it may have been love!"

Then the King, no longer capable of mastering his passion, overturned with a blow of his fist a table standing beside his bed, and almost weeping, suffocated with pain, threw himself on his bed, fully dressed as he was, and bit the sheets as he lay writhing there trying in vain to find at least bodily repose. The bed creaked beneath his weight, and apart from a few gasping sighs which escaped the King's tortured breast, no further sound was heard from the chamber of Morpheus.

Morpheus, the god of slumber, who reigned supreme in the chamber called by his name, and towards whom Louis turned his eyes, reddened by passion and heavy with tears,—Morpheus showered down upon him all the poppies with which his hands were filled, till the King's eyelids softly closed and he fell asleep.

Then it seemed to him, as so often happens in that first slumber, so soft and light, which raises the body above the couch where it lies, the soul above the earth—it seemed to him that the god Morpheus, painted upon the ceiling, was gazing

at him with human eyes; that something stirred and shone in the dome above him, that the swarm of ominous dreams, swept aside for a moment, gave place to a man's face with a hand over the mouth, bending down in an attitude of profound contemplation; and, strange to say, this man bore such a likeness to the King that Louis fancied he was looking at his own face in a glass. Only this face was saddened by a sentiment of deepest pity. Then it seemed to him that, little by little, the dome retreated, and that the figures, with their attributes of Le Brun's painting, grew dimmer as they receded more and more. A smooth, regular motion, as rhythmic as that of a boat upon the waves, had succeeded to the immobility of the bed on which he was lying. The King was, doubtless, dreaming, and in his dream the crown of gold which held the curtains together, receded from his vision, like the dome from which it was suspended, so that the winged genius, who held the crown in his hands, seemed to call vainly to the King, who was moving farther and farther away.

The bed was still sinking. Louis, with wide-open eyes, gave himself up to this cruel hallucination. At last the lights in the royal chamber began to burn dimly, and something cold, sombre, inexplicable seemed to invade the air. No more pictures nor gold, nor velvet hangings were visible—nothing but dull grey walls, which the increasing gloom made darker each moment. And still the bed continued to descend, until, after a moment, which seemed like a century to the King, it struck a layer of black and icy air. There it stopped. The King could no longer see the light in his room, except as one might see the light of day from the bottom of a well.

"I am dreaming a frightful dream!" he thought. "It is time to awake. Come, I must awake!"

Every one has experienced this sensation; there is no one who, in the midst of a stifling nightmare, has not said to himself by the help of that light which burns on in the brain, where all human light is extinguished: "It is nothing, I am dreaming."

This was what Louis XIV said to himself; but as he was saying, "I must awake," he perceived that he was not only awake, but that his eyes were wide open. Then he looked around him.

On his right hand and his left stood two armed men, each enveloped in a huge cloak and with the face hidden by a mask. One of these men held in his hand a small lamp whose smoky light revealed the saddest picture on which a King's eyes could dwell.

Louis said to himself that his dream was still going on, and that to dispel it he had only to move his arm and raise his voice. He sprang from the bed, therefore, and found himself upon the damp ground. Then he addressed the man who held the lamp: "What is this, monsieur? What means this jest?"

"It is no jest," replied, in a hollow voice, the masked figure who held the lantern.

The King, more impatient than intimidated, turned to the second mask. "If this is a comedy," he said, "you may tell M. Fouquet that I regard it as unseemly and that it must cease."

This second mask, to whom the King had spoken, was a man of vast stature and huge circumference. He held himself erect and motionless as a block of marble.

"Well," added the King, with a stamp of his foot, "you do not answer."

"We do not answer you, my little monsieur," replied the giant in a stentorian voice, "because there is nothing to answer, except that you are the first of the *fâcheux,* and that M. Coquelin de Volière forgot to include you among his personages."

The King shrank from violence; for he realised that these two men who had him in their power had not gone so far with the idea of drawing back, and that, accordingly, they would carry out their scheme to the bitter end. He shook his head.

"I have fallen into the hands of assassins, it seems," he said. "Lead on!"

Neither of the men vouchsafed a reply to this speech; he who held the lamp led the way; the King followed, and the second masked man brought up the rear. In this order they traversed a long winding gallery, diversified with as many flights of steps as are to be found in the dark, mysterious palaces of Anne Radcliffe.

These many detours, in following which the King heard several times the trickling of water overhead, ended finally in a long corridor closed by an iron door. The man with the lamp unlocked this door with the aid of one of the keys hanging from his belt which the King had heard jangling along the way.

As this door opened and admitted a breath of the outer air, Louis recognised the balmy odours which the forest exhales after a warm summer's day. He paused, hesitating for a moment, but his stalwart keeper thrust him forth from the underground passage.

"Come," replied the first of the two men, in a tone of respect as he led his prisoner towards a coach which seemed to be waiting for them. This coach was entirely concealed by the foliage; the two horses with their feet fettered were fastened by a halter to the lower branches of a mighty oak.

"Get in," said the same man, as he opened the coach-door and let down the step. The King obeyed and seated himself in the carriage, whose padded door closed itself with a lock upon him and his companion. Meanwhile the giant was unfastening the straps which bound the horses, and having harnessed them himself he mounted upon the box, which was unoccupied. The carriage followed the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and having called out to the sentry, "By order of the King," the driver directed the horses into the circular enclosure of the Bastille, leading to the governor's court. Here the horses were drawn up, reeking with sweat, at the entrance steps. A sergeant of the guard hastened up.

"Go and wake the governor," called the coachman in a voice of thunder.

Ten minutes later M. de Baisemeaux appeared on the threshold in his dressing-gown.

"What is wanted?" he demanded, "and whom are you bringing me there?"

The man of the lantern opened the coach door and spoke two words to the driver. The latter got down at once from the box, seized a musket which lay at his feet, and placed its muzzle against the prisoner's breast.

"Fire if he speaks!" added aloud the man who was stepping from the carriage.

"Very good," replied the other, without any further observation. Having given this order, the King's captor ascended the steps, at the top of which the governor stood awaiting him.

"M. d'Herblay," cried the latter.

"Hush," said Aramis. "Let us go into your room."

"Good Heavens! what brings you here at this hour?"

"A mistake, my dear M. de Baisemeaux," replied Aramis, calmly, "it seems that it was you who were in the right the other day."

"On what subject?" inquired the governor.

"It is a simple matter enough. You remember, dear M. de Baisemeaux, their sending you an order to release a prisoner?"

"Yes, Marchiali."

"Well, dear M. de Baisemeaux, it was an error. They recog-

nised it as such at the ministry, and consequently I bring you an order from the King to liberate—that poor devil of a Scotchman, Seldon, you know."

"But what about the other, then?"

"What other?"

"Marchiali?"

"I have brought him back to you."

"But that is not sufficient. I must have a new order to receive him."

"Do not say such things as that, my dear Baisemeaux. You talk like a child! Where is the order you received in regard to Marchiali?"

Baisemeaux ran to his chest and brought it out. Aramis seized it, and coolly tore it into four pieces, held them up to the candle, and burnt them.

"What are you doing there?" cried Baisemeaux, at the highest pitch of terror.

"Consider the situation, my dear friend," pursued Aramis, with his imperturbable calmness, "and you will at once perceive how simple it is. You have no longer any order justifying the release of Marchiali."

"No. My God! I am a lost man!"

"Not at all, since I am bringing Marchiali back. From the moment that I bring him back to you it is all the same as if he had never got out."

"Ah!" cried the governor, completely stunned.

"And you will deliver up to me Seldon, who is released by the new order. In that way your numbers will be made right."

"But why in Heaven's name, after carrying off Marchiali, do you bring him back to me?" cried the wretched governor, in a paroxysm of misery and perplexity.

"For a friend like you, for so devoted a servant," said Aramis, "I have no secrets." And placing his lips close to the governor's ear: "You know," he went on, in a whisper, "what a resemblance exists between the unhappy wretch——"

"And the King; yes."

"Well, the first use that Marchiali made of his liberty was to maintain—guess what?"

"How do you expect me to guess?"

"To maintain that he was the true king of France."

"Oh, the wretch!" cried Baisemeaux.

"That is why I have brought him back to you, dear friend. He is insane and airs his insanity before all the world."

"What is to be done with him, then?"

"It is a simple matter. Suffer him to communicate with no one. You understand that when his madness came to the

ears of the King, who had taken pity on his misfortune and thus saw himself rewarded for his kindness by the blackest ingratitude, the King was furious. Accordingly—and attend closely to this, dear M. de Baisemeaux, for it concerns you vitally—accordingly, there is sentence of death decreed against all who shall allow him to communicate with any beside myself or the King in person. You hear, Baisemeaux, sentence of death."

"I hear very plainly, *morbleu*!"

"And now go out and conduct the poor devil back to his cell. It is better to lock him up at once, is it not?"

"*Pardieu!*"

"Let us go, then!"

Baisemeaux ordered the drums to beat and the bell to be rung which warned every one to retire in order to avoid encountering a mysterious prisoner. Then as soon as the passages were cleared, he went down to take the prisoner from the coach, where Porthos, faithful to his orders, was still holding the musket to his breast.

"Ah, it is you, wretch!" cried Baisemeaux, upon perceiving the King. "Good! good!" and forcing the King to descend from the carriage he conducted him—still accompanied by Porthos, who had never laid aside his mask, and by Aramis, who had resumed his—to the second Bertaudière, and opened to him the door of the chamber in which Philippe had groaned for six long years.

The King entered the cell without uttering a syllable. He was pale and haggard. Baisemeaux closed the door upon him, gave a double turn to the key, and, returning to Aramis, remarked:

"It is true, by my faith, that he looks like the King; not so much so, however, as you seem to think."

"You are an invaluable man, my dear Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "Come, now, release me Seldon."

"True! I was forgetting that—I will give orders."

"Bah! to-morrow will be time enough."

"To-morrow? No, no, this very instant. Heaven defend me from delaying a second!"

"Very well! attend to your affairs, then. I shall look after mine. But you understand, do you not?"

"Understand what?"

"That no one is to enter the prisoner's cell except by a direct order from the King—an order that I shall bring myself."

"It is understood. Adieu, monseigneur."

Aramis returned to his companion.

"Come, come, friend Porthos, to Vaux! and at full speed!"

"A man is light of heart when he has served his king faithfully, and in serving him has served his country," said Porthos. "The horses will have no heavy load to draw. Let us be off!"

And the coach, relieved of the weight of a prisoner who might well have seemed to Aramis a heavy load, crossed the drawbridge of the Bastille, which was at once raised behind it.

Meanwhile, the young King, stupefied and utterly broken down, fancied at first that death is like sleep and has its dreams; he fancied that his bed had broken through the floor of his chamber at Vaux, that death had resulted, and that, following out the dream which had come to him while still a King, he—Louis XIV—was dreaming in death one of those horrors impossible in life, which are called the dethronement, imprisonment, and degradation of a once mighty king.

"Is this what is called hell—is this eternity?" murmured Louis XIV as the door closed upon him. He no longer looked around, but leaning against the wall of his chamber abandoned himself to the terrible consciousness of death, and kept his eyes closed lest he should see things more awful still.

"How did I come by my death?" he said to himself in this half-frenzy. "Was my bed let down by some secret contrivance? But no—I felt no jar, no shock. Did they not rather poison me at supper, or by the fumes of wax, as they poisoned my great-grandmother, Jeanne d'Albret?"

Suddenly the chill of this chamber fell like a mantle about Louis' shoulders. The King at once knew himself to be alive and in possession of reason and consciousness.

"A prisoner," he cried, "I—I—a prisoner!" He looked about for a bell with which to summon aid.

"There are no bells in the Bastille," he exclaimed, "and it is in the Bastille that I am confined. Now, how is it that I have been made prisoner? It is without doubt a plot of M. Fouquet's. I was drawn to Vaux as into a trap. But M. Fouquet cannot be alone in this business. His accomplice—that voice was M. d'Herblay's. I recognised it. Colbert was right. But what does Fouquet design to do with me? Will he reign in my place? Impossible! who knows?" pursued the King, with yet deeper gloom, "my brother, the Duke of Orléans, may have conspired against me, as my uncle was conspiring all his life against my father. But the Queen? my mother, too? and La Vallière? There is a governor here," he cried in fury. "I will appeal to him. I will summon him!"

He called loudly, but no voice replied. He seized a chair and tried to batter down the massive oak door. The wood

resounded upon the wood of the door and awoke lugubrious echoes down the long corridors, but no human creature answered, none. After an hour spent thus Louis heard a noise in the corridor outside his door, and a violent blow directed against the door itself caused his blows to cease.

"What is all this? Are you mad?" cried a coarse, rough voice. "What has got hold of you this morning?"

"This morning!" thought the King, in amazement; then he added civilly: "Monsieur, are you the governor of the Bastille?"

"My good fellow, your brain is cracked," replied the voice, "but that is no reason for making such an uproar. Be silent, *mordieu*!"

"Are you the governor?" demanded the King once more. He heard a door shut; the turnkey had departed without even deigning to reply. When the King became convinced of this departure his fury knew no bounds. Two hours later he would have passed no longer for a King, a gentleman, a man, a human being; he was a madman tearing out his nails against the doors, trying to dig up the floor of his cell, uttering such frightful cries that the old Bastille seemed shaken to its foundations for having dared to revolt against its master. As for the governor, he had not even disturbed himself. The turnkeys and sentries had reported to him. But what mattered it? Were not madmen an every-day matter in the fortress, and were not the walls strong enough to resist them?

M. de Baisemeaux, deeply impressed by all that Aramis had told him, and convinced that he was acting in strict conformity to orders, asked nothing better than that the madman, Marchiali, should be mad enough to hang himself to the canopy of his bed or to one of his window bars. In fact, this prisoner was not a very profitable one, and gave far more trouble than he was worth. These complications between Seldon and Marchiali, this confusion of orders and counter-orders, this problem of an annoying likeness would thus find a convenient solution. Baisemeaux even fancied that such a *dénouement* would not be altogether displeasing to M. d'Herblay.

"And then, really," remarked Baisemeaux to his major, "an ordinary prisoner is quite wretched enough at being a prisoner; he suffers sufficiently to make it an act of charity to hope for his death. All the more when the prisoner has gone mad and may bite, and make a disturbance in the Bastille. Then, by my faith! it is not merely charity to wish him dead, but it would be a benevolent deed to assist in putting him quietly out of his misery." Thereupon the worthy governor sat down to his second breakfast.

CHAPTER XXI

D'Artagnan, still confused and oppressed by the conversation he had just had with the King, kept asking himself if he were actually in his right mind, if the scene had really taken place at Vaux, if he, D'Artagnan, were indeed the captain of musketeers and M. Fouquet the owner of the château in which Louis XIV had been so hospitably entertained. M. Fouquet had just placed himself in the hands of his *valet de chambre*, when D'Artagnan appeared on the threshold of his room.

"What! M. d'Artagnan!" cried Fouquet, whose arm was already out of his sleeve.

"At your service," replied the musketeer.

"Have you anything to communicate to me?"

"Is this your bed here?"

"Yes; why that question? Are you not satisfied with yours?"

"Shall I speak frankly?"

"Most assuredly."

"Well, then, I am not."

Fouquet started. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "take my room."

"And deprive you of it, monseigneur? Never!"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Will you permit me to share it with you?"

M. Fouquet stared fixedly at the musketeer.

"Ah! ah!" he said, "you have just come from the King?"

"Yes, directly, monseigneur."

M. Fouquet turned to his valet. "Leave us," he said. The man left the room. "You have something to say to me, monsieur?" remarked the superintendent.

"I?"

"A man of your good sense does not come to talk with a man like me at such an hour without a serious motive."

"Do not question me."

"Come, confess that you are here to arrest me," said the superintendent to the captain.

"Never!" exclaimed the latter.

"To keep guard over me, then?"

"A guard of honour, yes, monseigneur."

"I will order my horses and drive to Paris," said Fouquet, sounding the heart of the captain of musketeers.

"Ah, in that case, monseigneur, it is a different matter."

"You arrest me?"

"No, but I go with you."

"That is enough, M. d'Artagnan," resumed Fouquet, coldly. "It is not for nothing that you have such a high reputation as a man of wit and resource, but all that is wasted on me. Come to the point at once; do me that service. Why are you arresting me? What have I done?"

"Oh! I know nothing as to what you have done; and moreover I am not arresting you—to-night."

"To-night!" cried Fouquet, turning pale; "but to-morrow?"

"We have not reached to-morrow yet, monseigneur. Who can ever answer for the morrow?"

"Quick! quick! captain. Let me have speech with M. d'Herblay."

"Monseigneur," replied the Gascon, touched by this eloquent and dignified misfortune, "will you give me your word of honour that you will not attempt to leave this room?"

"Of what use would it be, dear M. d'Artagnan, since you are guarding me? Do you fear lest I should struggle against the most valiant sword in the kingdom?"

"It is not that, monseigneur; but I am about to go and fetch M. d'Herblay to you, and consequently to leave you alone. Now, monseigneur, pledge me your word of honour that you will in no way seek to escape, and that I shall find you here on my return."

"I pledge it, monsieur," replied Fouquet, while he grasped the musketeer's hand in affectionate gratitude.

D'Artagnan vanished. Fouquet waited with visible impatience until the door had closed behind him, then threw himself upon his keys, opened several secret drawers concealed in different pieces of furniture, searched in vain for certain papers which had probably been left behind at Saint Mandé, and which he seemed disturbed at not finding, and then hurriedly seizing all the letters, contracts, papers of all sorts which he found, he piled them together and burned them in haste upon the marble hearth, not even taking the trouble to remove the flower-pots which encumbered it. Then, this operation accomplished, like a man who has escaped some great danger, and whose strength fails him as soon as it is over, he fell exhausted into his arm-chair.

D'Artagnan on re-entering the room found Fouquet in the same position in which he had left him. The worthy musketeer had never entertained a doubt that Fouquet having pledged his word would fail to keep it; but he had expected

that the superintendent would utilise his guard's absence in getting rid of all the papers, notes, and contracts which might compromise the master of Vaux in the grave situation in which he already found himself. Then the eyes of the two men met, and each perceived that he had understood the other without the interchange of a word.

"Well!" spoke Fouquet first, "and M. d'Herblay?"

"Faith! monseigneur," replied D'Artagnan, "M. d'Herblay must be very fond of nocturnal promenades, for he seems to be wandering about the park of Vaux in the moonlight, making verses with some of your poets. He is not in his room."

"But did you not call to him, monsieur, in such a way that he was sure to hear you?"

"However softly one calls Aramis, monseigneur, Aramis always hears, if it is for his interest to hear. I repeat, then, either Aramis was not in his room or he had reasons of his own for not recognising my voice—reasons of which I am ignorant, and of which you may possibly be ignorant also, however much the Lord Bishop of Vannes may be a liegeman of yours."

Fouquet remained silent for a moment, then spoke again.

"So be it, then! Keep as close to me as my shadow. I prefer that shadow to another." D'Artagnan bowed. "But forget that you are M. d'Artagnan, captain of musketeers, forget that I am M. Fouquet, superintendent of finance, and let us talk over my situation."

"*Peste!* a thorny matter! You are harassed; you have many things to think over. I conjure you, therefore, sleep, or make a semblance of sleeping on your bed or in your bed. As for me, I go to sleep in this armchair, and when I have dropped off I sleep so soundly that the roar of cannon would not wake me."

Fouquet smiled.

"That is to say," continued the musketeer, "that I make an exception as to the opening of a door, whether secret or visible, whether it be to go out or come in. Oh, as to that sound my ears are vulnerable to the last degree! The least creaking startles me; it is an affair of natural antipathy. Come and go, then, about your chamber, walk up and down as much as you please, write, efface, tear up, burn; but do not touch the key in the lock, do not touch the handle of the door, for you would awake me with a start, and that would shake my nerves terribly."

"Decidedly, M. d'Artagnan," said Fouquet, "you are the

wittiest and most courteous man I ever met, and you leave me but one regret, which is not to have made your acquaintance earlier."

D'Artagnan heaved a sigh as if to say:

"Alas! you might better have made it later!"

Thereupon he buried himself in his armchair, while Fouquet, half lying on his bed and leaning on one elbow, meditated upon his last adventure. Thus both of them, leaving the candles to burn themselves out, waited for the first gleams of dawn. When Fouquet sighed too deeply D'Artagnan only snored the louder. No visitor, not even Aramis, came to break their quietude; not a sound was audible throughout that vast palace.

Outside the guards of honour and patrols of musketeers paced by, making the gravel creak beneath their tread; the sound only lulled the sleepers more profoundly. Added to this were the rustling of the wind and the splashing of the fountains still pursuing their eternal tasks without concern for the petty noises and petty agitations which make up the life and death of man.

CHAPTER XXII

As a contrast to the sad and terrible destiny of the King shut up within the walls of the Bastille, and clutching despairingly at the bolts and bars, the rhetoric of the historians of old would not fail to present the antithesis of Philippe sleeping underneath the royal canopy. The young prince descended from Aramis' abode in the same manner that the King had descended from the chamber of Morpheus. The dome sank gently under M. d'Herblay's weight, and Philippe found himself before the royal bed, which had ascended again after having deposited its prisoner in the depths of the underground vaults.

"I am face to face with my fate," said Philippe, with fiery eye and livid face. "Will it be more ominous than my imprisonment was sad? Come, come! let us pattern after M. d'Herblay, who believes that action should ever be a pace ahead of thought: let us pattern after M. d'Herblay, who thinks always of himself, and who considers himself to be an honest man if he injures or betrays none but his enemies. This bed I alone would have occupied, if Louis XIV had not stood in my way, through my mother's fault Philippe, son

of France, ascend again to your bed. Philippe, sole ruler of France, resume your rank! Philippe, sole heir presumptive of Louis XIII, your father, show no pity for the usurper who even now feels no remorse for all that you have suffered!"

Thus saying, Philippe, despite an instinctive repugnance and the shudders of terror that daunted his resolution, threw himself upon the royal bed and compelled his muscles to press the still warm place left by Louis XIV. He attended the slightest sound, his heart almost stifled by his varied emotions. But nothing happened. Silence, the mortal enemy of troubled souls, the mortal enemy of ambitious men, shrouded in its dense shadow, all night long, the future King of France, underneath his stolen crown.

Towards morning a shadow rather than a body glided into the royal chamber. Philippe awaited the approach, but betrayed no surprise.

"Well, M. d'Herblay?" said he.

"Well, Sire, all is done."

"Did the governor of the Bastille suspect anything?"

"Nothing at all."

"But pray bethink you that the prisoner will not fail to reveal his identity. I myself have been able to do that when I had to oppose a power much better established than my own is now."

"I have already provided for that. In a few days, perhaps sooner, if need be, we will take the captive out of his prison and send him into exile in a country so far away that the strength of the man and the length of his days will not suffice for his return."

Once again the eye of the young King met that of Aramis with a gleam of cold intelligence.

"And M. du Vallon?" said Philippe, to change the conversation.

"He will be presented to you to-day, and—confidentially—will congratulate you upon escaping the danger which this usurper has made you undergo."

"What is to be done with him?"

"With M. du Vallon?"

"A dukedom—what think you?"

"Certainly. You would kill him in this way. He would die of joy, and the secret with him."

"Ah! Heaven help us!"

"As for me," continued the phlegmatic Aramis, "I should lose a very good friend."

At this moment, in the midst of the idle conversation under which the two conspirators concealed their pride and joy at their success, Aramis heard something that caused him to prick up his ears.

"What is it?" said Philippe.

"Why, before retiring last night, on this bed, you probably decided to do something this morning at daybreak, did you not?"

"I told my captain of the musketeers that I should await him," replied the young man, quickly.

"If you told him that, he will certainly be on hand, for he is a punctual man. But really, Sire, before you permit D'Artagnan to come in, you must bring in so many people that the keenest scent in this kingdom will be thrown off by twenty different trails."

"But how can I dismiss him, when I have made an appointment with him?" replied the prince, impatient to measure swords with his redoubtable adversary.

"I will see to that," replied the bishop, "and, to make a start, I am going to strike a blow that will stun our man."

"He is striking a blow just now, on his own account," interjaculated the prince hurriedly.

And indeed a knock resounded through the corridor. Aramis was not deceived. It was D'Artagnan who thus announced his presence. But instead of the royal figure which he was on the point of saluting respectfully, he perceived the long and imperturbable countenance of Aramis. He could hardly repress an exclamation, so great was his surprise.

"Aramis!" he said.

"How are you, my dear D'Artagnan?" replied the prelate coldly.

"You here?" stammered the musketeer.

"His Majesty," replied the bishop, "prays you to announce that he is resting after having been very weary through the night."

"Ah!" observed D'Artagnan, who could not comprehend how the Bishop of Vannes, so slight a favourite on the preceding evening, had become on six hours' notice the tallest mushroom of fortune that had ever sprung up in a king's bedroom. Indeed, to carry to the threshold of the royal chamber the commands of the King, to serve as an intermediary to Louis XIV, to give orders in his name at two paces from him, one must be greater than ever was Richelieu with Louis XIII. The expressive eyes of D'Artagnan, his parted lips, his curling moustache, said all this in the most

eloquent of languages to the reigning favourite, who, however, remained imperturbable.

"Moreover," continued the bishop, "you will see to it, M. the Captain of the Musketeers, that no one is admitted this morning to the royal presence without special permission. His Majesty wishes to remain asleep."

"But," objected D'Artagnan, on the point of refusing to obey, and, above all, of giving vent to the suspicions aroused in him by the King's silence, "but, M. the Bishop, his Majesty has granted me a rendezvous for this morning."

"Later, later," came the voice of the King from the depths of the alcove—a voice which sent a shiver through the musketeer's veins. He bowed, overwhelmed, stupefied, stunned by the smile with which Aramis seemed to crush him so soon as the words were uttered.

"And then," continued the bishop, "as an answer to the matter about which you came to consult the King, my dear D'Artagnan, here is an order which you will please take note of immediately, for it concerns M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan took the order that was held out to him.

"To be set at liberty?" he murmured. "Ah!"

And he uttered a second "Ah!" more intelligent than the first, since this order explained Aramis' presence with the King. Aramis, in order to obtain pardon for M. Fouquet, must have made considerable progress in the royal favour; and this favour, in turn, would explain the almost incredible assurance with which M. d'Herblay gave out orders in the name of his Majesty the King. For D'Artagnan it sufficed to have understood something in order to understand everything. He bowed and turned away two paces.

"I will accompany you," said the bishop.

"Where to?"

"To M. Fouquet's. I desire to take part in his joy."

"Ah, Aramis, how you upset me, just now," remarked D'Artagnan.

"But you understand now?"

"Odds! Why not?"

Then, in an aside, almost hissing between his teeth:

"No—no, I do not understand. But it is all the same; here is the King's order." And he added, "This way, monseigneur," as he conducted Aramis to the room of Fouquet.

As soon as the latter beheld D'Artagnan returning, followed by the Bishop of Vannes, his joy scarcely knew bounds; it rivalled all his previous anxiety. The sight of Aramis was to the superintendent a compensation for all the griefs he had undergone because of his arrest. The prelate was silent and

grave. D'Artagnan was nonplussed by this accumulation of incredible happenings.

"Well, captain, so you really have brought M. d'Herblay?"

"And something better still, monseigneur."

"What is it?"

"Your liberty."

Fouquet resumed his habitual serenity in order to question Aramis by a look.

"Oh, yes; you can thank M. the Bishop of Vannes," pursued D'Artagnan, "for he it was who brought about the King's revocation."

"Oh!" said M. Fouquet, more humiliated by the service than grateful for its success.

"But you," continued D'Artagnan, turning to Aramis, "you who protect M. Fouquet, cannot you do something for me?"

"Anything you like, my friend," replied the bishop, calmly.

"Only one thing, then, and I shall call myself satisfied. How is it that you have become the King's favourite—you who have not spoken to him more than twice in your life?"

"From a friend like yourself," rejoined Aramis, subtilely, "one can conceal nothing."

"Good! Proceed."

"Well, then, you believe that I have seen the King but twice, when in reality I have seen him more than a hundred times. Only we have hidden the fact—that's all."

And without trying to extinguish the renewed glow of colour brought to D'Artagnan's forehead by this new revelation, Aramis turned toward M. Fouquet, who was no less surprised than the musketeer.

"Monseigneur," he continued, "the King has charged me to say to you that he is more than ever your friend, and that your handsome entertainment, so generously offered, has touched his heart."

Upon which he bowed to M. Fouquet so reverently that the latter, incapable of understanding anything in a diplomacy so vigorous as this, stood speechless, without motion or idea. D'Artagnan thought that the two men had something to say to each other, and was on the point of obeying that instinctive politeness which in such case precipitates a man towards the door when he feels his company irksome to the others; but his eager curiosity, spurred on by so many mysteries, counselled him to remain.

Aramis turned towards him and said quietly:

"You will not forget, my friend, the King's order respecting those who are to be received at his rising?"

The words were clear enough; the musketeer understood them. He bowed to M. Fouquet, then to Aramis, with a tinge of ironical respect, and disappeared.

M. Fouquet, whose impatience could hardly await this moment, darted towards the door to close it, and returning to the bishop, said:

"D'Herblay, in the name of our alliance, our friendship, and everything you hold dear in this world, speak, I beseech you! By what means have you succeeded thus in reaching Louis XIV? He did not favour you, I am certain of that."

"The King will favour me *now*," said Aramis, laying emphasis upon the last word.

"You have some special bond with him, then?"

"Yes."

"A secret, perhaps?"

"Yes, a secret."

"A secret of the sort to change his Majesty's interests?"

"You are really a man of superior intelligence, monseigneur. You have guessed it. I have, in fact, unearthed a secret of a sort to change the interests of the King of France."

"Ah!" said Fouquet, with the reserve of a well-bred man who does not wish to question.

"And you shall be the judge," pursued Aramis; "you shall tell me if I deceive myself concerning the importance of this secret."

"I listen, since you are good enough to unbosom to me. Only pray take note, my friend, that I have invited no confidence that it would be indiscreet for you to make."

Aramis grew reserved for a moment.

"Do not speak," cried Fouquet. "There is still time."

"Do you remember," said the bishop, with downcast eyes, "the birth of Louis XIV?"

"As though it were to-day."

"Have you ever heard anything particular about this birth?"

"Nothing, except that the King was not really the son of Louis XIII."

"This is where my secret begins."

"Ah!"

"The Queen instead of being delivered of one son was delivered of two."

Fouquet raised his head.

"And the second is dead?" he asked.

"You shall see. These twin children seemed in a fair way to become the pride of their mother and the hope of France. But the weakness of the King and his superstition made him

fearful of conflict between the two children, whose rights were equal. He suppressed one of the twins."

"Suppressed, say you?"

"Give heed. The two children grew to manhood. One is on the throne and you are his minister; the other dwells in shadow and seclusion."

"And the latter?"

"Is my friend."

"Good Heavens! What are you telling me, M. d'Herblay? And what is this poor prince doing?"

"Ask me rather what he has done."

"Yes, yes."

"He has been brought up in the country, then sequestered in a fortress known as the Bastille."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed the superintendent, clasping his hands.

"Both were legitimate heirs to the throne, and should have been kings. Is not that your opinion?"

"It is."

"Positively?"

"Positively. Twins are one being in two bodies."

"I am delighted that a counsellor of your discernment and authority should give me this opinion. Then it is agreed between us that they possessed the same rights, is it not?"

"It is. But, good Heavens! what a situation!"

"You are not to the end yet. Patience."

"Oh! I shall find it."

"God wished to raise up for the oppressed an avenger, or a supporter, if you prefer. It happened that the reigning King, the usurper—you believe with me, do you not, that it is usurpation when one remains in tranquil enjoyment and selfish possession of an inheritance, who, at most, has the right to only half?"

"Usurpation is the word."

"I continue, then. God so willed that the usurper should have for prime minister a man of talent, large of heart, great of mind, above all else."

"Good, good!" cried Fouquet. "I understand; you have counted on me to aid you to repair the wrong done to the poor brother of Louis XIV. You have reckoned wisely. I will aid you. Thank you D'Herblay, thank you."

"That is not all yet. You will not let me finish," said the impassible Aramis

"I am silent."

"M. Fouquet, as I was saying, being the minister of the reigning King, became an object of aversion to the King, and

was strongly menaced with the loss of fortune, liberty, and life, perhaps, by the intrigue and the hatred too readily heeded of the King. But God so wills—still in the interest of the sacrificed prince—that M. Fouquet shall have, in his turn, a devoted friend who knows the secret of state and who feels enough resolution to divulge it after having had strength enough to carry the secret for twenty years buried in his heart."

"You need not go further," said Fouquet, bubbling over with generous ideas; "I understand you and can guess everything. You went to see the King when the news of my arrest reached you. You supplicated for me, and he refused to listen. Then you menaced him with the secret and its revelation, and Louis XIV, astounded, has granted to the fear of your indiscretion what he denied to your generous intercession. I understand, I understand! You hold the King! I understand!"

"You understand nothing at all," replied Aramis, "and you have interrogated me again, my friend. Moreover, allow me to tell you that you are forsaking your logic, and are not utilising your memory enough."

"In what way?"

Aramis made a tour of the room to assure himself of its security and silence, and then came back to his former place beside the armchair wherein sat Fouquet awaiting his revelations with a profound anxiety.

"I forgot to tell you," resumed Aramis to Fouquet, who listened with the minutest attention, "a remarkable fact about the royal twins; it is that God has made them so much alike that He alone, if He should cite them before His judgment seat, would be able to tell them apart. Their own mother cannot."

"Is it possible?" cried Fouquet.

"The same noble cast of countenance, the same bearing, the same stature, the same voice."

"But their thoughts, their intelligence, their knowledge of life?"

"Oh! there is the difference, monseigneur. Yes, for the prisoner of the Bastille is undeniably the superior of his brother; and if this poor victim should, by any chance, pass from his prison to the throne, France would not have had, since her founding, perhaps, a lord and master more puissant by reason of his genius and nobility of character."

Fouquet allowed his forehead to rest in his hands a moment, as though overcome by the tremendous secret. Aramis came closer.

"There is still another difference," said he, continuing his work of temptation; "a difference that concerns you, monseigneur, between the twin sons of Louis XIII. It is that the last comer does not know M. Colbert."

Fouquet raised his head presently, his features pale and drawn. The blow had struck home—not his heart, but his wit.

"I understand you," said he; "you propose a conspiracy."

"To some extent."

"One of those attempts which, as you said when we began our conversation, change the fate of empires."

"And of superintendents; yes, monseigneur."

"In a word, you propose to me to aid in the exchange of the son of Louis XIII who is a prisoner to-day, for the son of Louis XIII who at this moment is asleep in the chamber of Morpheus?"

Aramis smiled with the sinister expression of his sinister thought.

"Possibly," said he.

"Nevertheless," continued Fouquet, after an awkward silence, "you have not reflected that this political task is of a nature to upset the whole kingdom; and that to pull up by its deep-set roots this tree that is called a king, and to replace it by another would leave the soil in such a state of unstableness that the new king would never stand strong against the wind which remained from the last tempest, nor against the totterings of his own body."

Aramis continued to smile.

"And have you thought," continued M. Fouquet, warming up with that strength of mind which in a few moments plots out and matures a project, and with that breadth of view which foresees every consequence and embraces every result; "have you thought that we must call together the nobles, the clergy, and the third estate; that it will be necessary to depose the reigning prince, trouble the tomb of Louis XIII with a frightful scandal, imperil the life and honour of a woman, Anne of Austria, the life and safety of another woman, Maria Teresa, and that when all is done, if we finish——!"

"I do not follow you," said Aramis, icily. "There is not a word to the point in all that you have said."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my friend," replied Aramis, "I mean that if there is to be turmoil, scandal, or even effort in the substitution of the prisoner for the King I defy you to prove it!"

"What are you saying?" cried Fouquet, whiter than the

handkerchief with which he wiped his temples; "you mean——"

"Come to the King's chamber," continued Aramis, impassibly, "and I defy you, who are in the mystery, to discern that it is the prisoner of the Bastille who is in his brother's bed."

"But the King?" stammered Fouquet, seized with horror at the piece of news.

"Which King?" said Aramis, in his sweetest accents, "the one who hates you, or the one who loves you?"

"The King—of yesterday?"

"The King of yesterday? Calm yourself. He has been taken to the Bastille, the place that his victim occupied for so long a time."

"Just Heaven! And who took him there?"

"I."

"You?"

"Yes, and by the simplest way. I took him during the night, and while he sank into the shadow, the other rose into the light. I do not believe that it made the slightest noise. A lightning flash without thunder never awakens any one."

Fouquet gave vent to a dull cry as though he had been struck a blow from some unseen force, and seized his head between his nerveless hands.

"You have dethroned the King? You have imprisoned him?"

"It is done."

Fouquet made a movement as if to throw himself upon Aramis, but restrained himself.

"At Vaux! In my own house!" said he in a choking voice.

"Yes, I believe so. It is undoubtedly your house, since M. Colbert cannot steal it from you."

"Then it was in my house that this crime was committed!"

"This crime?" said Aramis, stupefied.

"This abominable crime!" continued Fouquet, becoming more and more wrought up. "This crime more execrable than an assassination! This crime that dishonours my name for ever, and brings down on my head the horror of posterity!"

"There, there! You forget yourself, monsieur!" interposed Aramis, in an uncertain tone; "you speak too loudly. Be careful!"

"I will cry so loudly that the universe shall hear me."

"M. Fouquet, be careful!"

Fouquet turned towards the prelate and looked him in the eye.

"Yes," said he, "you have dishonoured me in committing this treason, this covert act upon my guest, on one who rested peacefully under my roof. Oh, woe is me!"

Aramis stood upright, his eyes blood-shot, his mouth twitching convulsively.

"Have I to deal with an insensate man?" he said.

"You have to deal with an honest man."

"Fool!"

"With a man who will prevent you from consummating your crime."

"Fool!"

"With a man who would rather die, who would rather kill you, than allow you to bring about his dishonour."

Aramis remained silent and motionless.

"You will not reply?"

Aramis lifted his head gently, and a gleam of hope might be seen shining forth again from his eyes.

"Reflect, monseigneur," said he, "upon all that awaits us. Simple justice is being done; the King still lives, and his imprisonment is the means of saving your life."

"Yes," replied Fouquet, "you may have been acting in my behalf, but I cannot accept your service. Nevertheless, I do not wish to do you hurt. You may leave the house."

Aramis stifled the cry that sought to come from his bursting heart.

"I extend the rights of hospitality to all," continued Fouquet, with an air of inexpressible majesty; "you shall not be sacrificed to fate any more than that one whose downfall you have wrought."

"But you yourself shall be," said Aramis in a hoarse, prophetic voice; "you shall be, you shall be!"

"I accept the augury, M. d'Herblay; but nothing shall stop me. You must leave Vaux, you must leave France. I give you just four hours to place yourself beyond reach of the King."

"Four hours!" retorted Aramis, mocking and incredulous.

"Upon the honour of a Fouquet! No one shall follow you before that. You would then have four hours the start of all whom the King might send in pursuit of you."

"Four hours!" repeated Aramis, colouring up.

"That is more than you will need to take ship and reach Belle-Isle, which I give you for a place of refuge."

"Ah!" murmured Aramis.

"Belle-Isle is my haven for you, as Vaux is my haven for the King. Go, D'Herblay, go. While I live there shall not fall a hair of your head."

"Thank you!" said Aramis, in a tone of chilly irony.

"Go, then, and give me your hand before we hasten apart —you to save your life, I to save my honour."

Aramis drew from his breast the hand he had there concealed. It was red with blood. He had dug his nails into his breast as if to punish the flesh for having nursed so many wild projects, as insensate and perishable as the life of man. Fouquet was seized with horror and pity. He opened his arms to Aramis.

"I am unarmed," murmured the latter, as fierce and terrible as the shade of Dido.

Then, without touching the outstretched hand of Fouquet, he turned aside and made a couple of steps backward. His last word was an imprecation. His last gesture was a curse which his blood-stained hand bestowed, as it sprinkled a few gory drops full in Fouquet's face; and both of them sprang out of the room by way of the secret staircase leading to the inner courtyard. Fouquet ordered his best horses, and Aramis paused at the foot of the staircase that led to Porthos' room. For a long time he meditated, while Fouquet's carriage left the paved courtyard at full gallop.

"Shall I go alone," said Aramis to himself, "or stop to warn the prince? Oh, fury! Warn the prince—then what? Flee with him? Take with me everywhere this accusing witness? Would not war follow? civil war, so implacable, and alas! without resource? Impossible! But what will he do without me? Oh, without me he will go to pieces as I would! Who knows? Let fate rule! He was condemned, let him remain so. God! Demon! Ominous and mocking power called by some the Genius of Mankind, thou blowest more uselessly and uncertainly than the mountain breeze. Thou callest thyself Chance, and thou art nothing. Thou encirclest the universe with thy spell, thou movest the rocky fastnesses, the mountain itself, and suddenly thou thyself art broken before the cross of dead wood, behind which shines another Power invisible—whom thou deniest, perhaps, but who visits vengeance upon thee, crushing thee to earth unrecognizingly! Lost! I have lost! What shall I do? Go to Belle-Isle? Yes. And Porthos will remain here and talk and tell everybody! Porthos, perhaps, will be the one to suffer. No! I cannot have Porthos come to grief. He is a part of me; his grief is mine. Porthos shall flee with me and share my lot. It must be so."

And Aramis, alarmed lest he might meet some one to whom this haste would seem suspicious, ascended the stairway with-

out attracting attention. Porthos had but just come back from Paris and slept already the sleep of the just. His enormous frame forgot its fatigue, while his spirit forgot its thoughts. Aramis entered noiselessly as a shadow, and laid his nervous hand upon the giant's shoulder.

"Away!" cried he, "away, Porthos, away!"

Porthos obeyed, rose up, and opened his eyes even before his mind had opened.

"We must go," said Aramis.

"Ah!"

"We must take horse more swift than ever before."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"Dress yourself, my friend."

And he helped the giant to put on his clothes, and stuffed his money and diamonds into his pockets. While thus engaged, a slight noise drew his attention. D'Artagnan was looking at them through a crack in the door. Aramis trembled.

"What the devil is making you so worried?" said the musketeer.

"Nonsense!" grumbled Porthos.

"We leave on a mission," added the bishop.

"You are very lucky!" said the musketeer.

"Pooh!" said Porthos, "I am tired out; but the King's business——"

"Listen," said Aramis, embracing the musketeer, "your good time is coming back again. You will no longer need to be jealous of anybody."

"Ah, bah!"

"I prophesy that this very day some happening will raise your rank."

"Indeed!"

"You know that I know something. Come, Porthos, are you ready? Let us away! How about the horses?"

"Oh, there are plenty here," said D'Artagnan. "Want mine?"

"No, Porthos has his own mount. Adieu! Adieu!"

The two fugitives mounted their horses under the very eyes of the captain of musketeers, who held Porthos' stirrup for him and followed his friends with his eyes until they had disappeared in the distance.

"On any other occasion than this," mused the Gascon, "I would have said that these two fellows were making their escape. But to-day politics have changed so much that it is called going on a mission. Well, I have nothing to say, save good wishes. My own affairs need looking after."

And he philosophically entered his lodgings.

CHAPTER XXIII

Fouquet tore along as fast as his horses could drag him. On his way he trembled with horror when he thought of the plot he had just learned.

"What must have been the younger days," he thought, "of those astounding men who even to-day, in their declining years, know how to hatch up such plots and to carry them out without a tremor!"

Again he would ask himself whether all that Aramis had told him were not a dream and whether the fable itself were not a trap, in which case he, Fouquet, on arriving at the Bastille, would find an order for his arrest that would send him to join the deposed King. With this idea in mind, he left sealed orders along the road, while his horses were being changed. These orders were addressed to M. d'Artagnan and to all the captains whose fidelity could be relied upon.

"In this way," said Fouquet to himself, "whether prisoner or not, I shall render the service I owe to the cause of honour. The orders will not arrive until after I return free, and so they will not be unsealed. I can take them back. If I am detained it will be because some misfortune has befallen me. In that case I would be sending aid to myself as well as to the King."

Thus prepared, he arrived at the Bastille. He had made five and a half leagues an hour.

All the delays that Aramis had escaped in the Bastille happened to M. Fouquet. In vain did he send in his name; in vain did he try to obtain recognition—he could not obtain admission.

"*Mordioux!* You are a pack of idiots!" cried the minister, jumping out of the carriage.

And before the officer had time to close the gate, Fouquet sprang through it and hastened in, despite the shouts of the soldier, who called for assistance. The sentinel presented his pike at the minister; but the latter, robust and agile and carried away by anger, seized it out of the soldier's hands and belaboured him soundly with it over the shoulders. The petty officer came too close, and he, also, got his share. Both uttered cries of rage, at sound of which the whole first body of the guard came running up. Fouquet commanded them to open the gate; but they required the countersign from him. Then he ordered them to send for the governor. The latter, however, had already learned of the disturbance at the gate.

At the head of a picket of twenty men he ran forward, followed by the major, in the belief that an attack had been planned against the Bastille. Baisemeaux also recognised Fouquet, and dropped his sword which he had just been brandishing.

"Ah, monseigner," he stammered, "how can I excuse——!"

"Monsieur," said the superintendent, red with rage and covered with perspiration, "I congratulate you; your guard is admirably maintained."

Baisemeaux grew pale, believing that the words were uttered ironically and foretold a furious bit of anger. Fouquet turned on him and said in a quick voice and with an imperious demeanour:

"Monsieur, you have seen M. d'Herblay this morning?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Well, monsieur, have you not felt the horror of the crime of which you have become the accomplice?"

"Come, not so bad after all!" thought Baisemeaux. Then he added aloud: "What crime, monseigneur?"

"That for which you could be drawn and quartered, monsieur; pray remember that! But this is not the time to be angry. Conduct me immediately to the prisoner."

"To what prisoner?" asked Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You pretend to be ignorant! But that is the best thing for you to do. In good sooth, if you were to confess a part in the crime, it would be the end of you. So I prefer to believe in your ignorance."

"I beseech you, monseigneur——"

"Very good. Lead me to the prisoner."

"To Marchiali?"

"Who is Marchiali?"

"The prisoner brought in this morning by M. d'Herblay."

"Was he called Marchiali?" observed the superintendent, troubled in mind by the ingenious assurance of Baisemeaux.

"Yes, monseigneur, that is the name that was set down for him here."

"I am come to relieve you of him, as it happens," said Fouquet.

"Ah, so much the better."

"Conduct me to his dungeon."

"Monseigneur, you who govern this realm know very well that no one can see the prisoners without an express order from the King."

"True!" cried Fouquet, in a rage; "true! Well, M. Baisemeaux," he added in resonant tones, drawing the unhappy man towards him, "do you know why I am so keenly desirous of speaking to the prisoner?"

"No, monseigneur; and deign to notice how you are terrifying me. I tremble and feel as though I would fall into a faint."

"You will be more likely to fall into a faint soon, when I come back with ten thousand men and thirty pieces of cannon."

"Good Heavens, monseigneur! You are out of your head."

"When I have aroused against you and yours all the people in Paris, and have battered down the gates, and have swung you to the corner bars!"

"Monseigneur! monseigneur! for pity's sake!"

"I will give you just ten minutes to decide," added Fouquet, calmly. "I will sit down here and wait. If at the end of ten minutes you persist in your refusal, I will leave, and you may think me demented or not, just as you please; but you shall see!"

Baisemeaux stamped the ground like a man in despair, but he answered not a word. Seeing this, Fouquet seized a pen and ink and wrote:

"Order for M. le Prévot des Marchands to call together the municipal guard and to march upon the Bastille for the service of the King."

Baisemeaux shrugged his shoulders. Fouquet continued to write:

"Order for M. le Duc de Bouillon and M. le Prince de Condé to take command of the Swiss and of the Guards, and march upon the Bastille, for the service of the King."

Baisemeaux reflected. Fouquet continued:

"Order for all the soldiery, municipal or noble, to seize and hold, wherever they may be found, the Chevalier d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes, and his accomplices to wit: first, M. de Baisemeaux, Governor of the Bastille, under suspicion of the crime of high treason, rebellion, and——"

"Stop, monseigneur," cried Baisemeaux. "I understand absolutely nothing of this; but so many evils, as though set on foot by madness itself, might happen here in a couple of hours, that the King, who shall judge me, shall see if I have done wrong in waiving his orders in the presence of so many imminent catastrophies. Come with me to the dungeon, monseigneur; you shall see Marchiali."

Fouquet darted out of the room, and Baisemeaux followed him, wiping away the cold sweat that trickled down his fore-

head. As they proceeded up the spiral staircase certain stifled murmurs gradually became distinct cries and fearful imprecations.

"What is that?" asked Fouquet.

"That is your Marchiali," answered the governor. "Just observe how these madmen howl!"

He accompanied the answer with a glance more filled with uncomfortable allusions than politeness for Fouquet.. The latter shuddered. He had just recognised in a cry more terrible than the rest the voice of the King.

"Quick, then, the keys!" said Fouquet, snatching them from him, "which door is it that I want to open?"

"That one."

A hideous cry, followed by a terrible blow on the door, made the echoes ring in the stairway.

"Leave me," said Fouquet to Baisemeaux, threateningly.

"I ask nothing better," murmured Baisemeaux. "Here are a couple of lunatics coming face to face. One of them will eat the other, I am certain."

"Away!" repeated Fouquet "If you set foot in this stairway before I call you, remember that you take the place of the vilest of your prisoners."

"I am in for it—no doubt of that!" grumbled Baisemeaux, as he withdrew with tottering steps.

The prisoner's cries resounded more and more formidably. Fouquet assured himself that Baisemeaux had reached the bottom of the steps before putting the key into the first lock. Then it was that he heard most distinctly the choking accents of the infuriated King.

"Help! I am the King! Help!"

The key to the second door was different from that of the first. Fouquet was obliged to look through the bunch. Meanwhile the King, enraged, maddened with passion, cried:

"It was M. Fouquet who had me brought here! Help me against M. Fouquet! I am the King! Help the King against M. Fouquet!"

The cries rent the minister's heart. They were followed by frightful blows upon the door with a chair which served the King as a battering-ram. At last Fouquet found the key. The King's strength was well-nigh spent. He no longer articulated, he roared:

"Death to Fouquet! Death to that traitor, Fouquet!"

The door opened. The two men were about to rush towards each other, but stopped suddenly as they came face to face, and uttered a cry of horror.

"Do you come to assassinate me, monsieur?" said the King, as he recognised Fouquet.

"Can this be the King?" murmured the minister.

Indeed, nothing could be more terrifying than the appearance of the young prince at the moment when Fouquet entered. His garments were in tatters. His undershirt, torn and gaping, was dripping with perspiration and blood which oozed from his lacerated breast and arms. Pale, haggard, foaming, with dishevelled hair, Louis XIV presented a true picture of despair, hunger, and fear blended in a single image. Fouquet was so touched, so troubled, that he hastened to the King with arms outstretched and eyes filled with tears. Louis brandished before Fouquet the piece of wood of which he had made so furious use.

"Well," said Fouquet, in a trembling voice, "do you not know the truest of your friends?"

"A friend—you?" repeated Louis, grinding his teeth, with hatred and thirst for speedy revenge.

"A devoted servant," added Fouquet, falling on his knees.

The King let fall his weapon Fouquet approached him, kissed his knees, and took him tenderly in his arms.

"My King! my child!" said he, "how you must have suffered!"

Louis, recalled to himself by the change in the situation, looked at himself and, ashamed of his disorder, ashamed of his rage, ashamed of the protection that he was receiving, drew back. Fouquet never understood this movement. He did not understand that the King's pride would never forgive him for having been witness to such weakness.

"Come, Sire, you are free," he said.

"Free?" repeated the King. "Oh! you give me my freedom after having dared to lift a hand against me?"

"You cannot believe that!" exclaimed Fouquet, warmly. "You cannot believe me guilty of such an action!"

And rapidly, vehemently even, he related all he knew of the details of the plot. While the story was being told, Louis underwent the most horrible anguish, and, when the tale was done, the greatness of the danger that he had run struck him as of vastly more importance than the secret relative to his twin brother.

"Monsieur," said he to Fouquet suddenly, "this double birth is a lie; it is impossible that you can have been duped by it. I have only one brother, that is Monsieur. You know that as well as I. There is a plot, I tell you, beginning with the governor of the Bastille."

"Take care, Sire; this man has been deceived, like everybody else, by the prince's resemblance to you."

"His resemblance to me? Come, now!"

"Be that as it may, Marchiali must look very like your Majesty to deceive everybody," insisted Fouquet.

"Ridiculous!"

"Say not so, Sire. The men who made ready to brazen it out before your ministers, your mother, your officials, and your household—these men ought to be very certain about the resemblance."

Louis reflected a moment.

"Good! You will deliver over the guilty ones, will you not?"

"How does your Majesty construe it?"

"I mean," replied the King, "that we shall presently reach Vaux with our troops, that we shall lay violent hands on the nest of vipers, and that none shall escape; none—is not that the word?"

"Sire," said the superintendent, with firmness, as he raised his head haughtily, "your Majesty will bring about the death—if it please you—of Philippe of France, your brother. That concerns you alone, and you may consult Anne of Austria, your royal mother. Whatever she may order will be well ordered. I do not wish to meddle in this matter further, not even for the honour of the crown; but I have one favour to ask of you; I now ask it."

"Speak," said the King, greatly troubled by the minister's last words. "What is it?"

"Pardon for M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon."

"My assassins?"

"Two rebels, Sire, nothing more."

"Oh! I understand; you are asking pardon for your friends."

"My friends!" said Fouquet, deeply wounded.

"Yes, your friends; but the welfare of my government demands a signal punishment for the culprits."

"I will not remind your Majesty that I have just brought you your liberty, saved your life."

"Monsieur!"

"I will not remind you that if M. d'Herblay had wished to play the part of an assassin, he could simply have assassinated your Majesty this morning, in the forest of Sénart, and thus ended the whole affair."

The King shuddered.

"A pistol ball through the head," continued Fouquet, "and the face of Louis XIV become unrecognisable, would have been a lasting pardon for M. d'Herblay."

The King grew livid with horror at thought of the peril he had run.

"M. d'Herblay," Fouquet went on, "if he had been an assassin, need not have told me his plot in order to succeed with it. Being rid of the true King, he would have made the false one free from suspicion. If the usurper had been recognised by Anne of Austria, he would still be her son. So far as M. d'Herblay's conscience were concerned, the usurper would still be a King of the blood of Louis XIII. Furthermore, the conspirator would have safety, secrecy, success. A pistol shot would have given him all that. Pardon for him, in the name of your own salvation, Sire!"

Instead of being touched by this picture, so true, of Aramis' generosity, the King felt himself cruelly humiliated. His unconquerable pride could not accustom itself to the idea that a mere man had held, suspended at the tip of his finger, the thread of a royal life. Every word thought by Fouquet to be efficacious in obtaining pardon for his friends carried a fresh drop of poison into the already ulcerated heart of Louis XIV Nothing could bend him.

"He shall never obtain pardon while I live," replied the inflexible King. "Do me the kindness to speak no more of it."

"Your Majesty shall be obeyed."

"And you will not bear me any grudge?"

"Oh, no, Sire, for it is as I expected."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the King, in surprise.

"M. d'Herblay came, so to speak, to give himself into my hands. M. d'Herblay left to me the happiness of saving my King and my country. I could not condemn M. d'Herblay to death. I could not expose him to the very justifiable anger of your Majesty; it would have been equivalent to killing him myself."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Sire, I gave M. d'Herblay my best horses, and they have four hours the start of any that your Majesty could send after him. After having gone at full speed, with four hours the start of your musketeers, he will reach my château of Belle-Isle, where I have given him an asylum."

The King became livid, and his eyes flashed fire. Fouquet felt himself lost. But he was not one to recoil when the voice of honour was sounding. He stood unquailing under the King's fierce gaze. The latter swallowed his anger and said after a pause: "Shall we return to Vaux?"

"I await your Majesty's commands," replied Fouquet,

bowing low; "but I believe your Majesty cannot omit changing your garb before appearing to your court."

"We shall pass by the Louvre," said the King. "Come."

And they departed, in the presence of the frightened Baisemeaux, who once again saw Marchiali leave, and who, at the sight, tore out the few hairs he had left. It is true that Fouquet gave him a discharge for the prisoner, and that the King wrote underneath:

"*Seen and approved. Louis.*"

—A piece of madness that Baisemeaux, incapable of putting two ideas together, acknowledged by a terrific whack of his fist on his own jaws.

CHAPTER XXIV

Meanwhile usurping royalty continued to play its part bravely at Vaux. Philippe opened the two panels of the door, and several persons entered silently. He did not stir while the valets were dressing him. He had observed closely the habits of his brother on the preceding evening. He played the King in a way to arouse no suspicions.

When he was fully dressed in a hunting costume, he received his callers. His memory and Aramis' notes kept him informed. First came Anne of Austria, to whom Monsieur gave his hand; then Madame with M. de Saint-Aignan. He smiled when he beheld these faces, but trembled on recognising his mother. He regarded Monsieur his brother with a tenderness easily understood. The latter had usurped nothing, had cast no cloud over his life. A separate branch, he had allowed the trunk to rise without envy of its elevation or the majesty of its life. Philippe promised himself to be a good brother to this prince who was satisfied with the gold that procured his pleasures. He bowed pleasantly to Saint-Aignan, who was smiling and bowing, and held out his hand tremblingly to Henrietta, his sister-in-law, whose beauty struck him. But he saw in the eyes of this princess a species of coldness that did not augur well for their future relations.

"How much easier will it be," thought he, "to be a brother to this woman than her gallant, if she evinces for me a coldness that my brother could not have for her, and which is imposed on me as a duty."

The only visit that he dreaded at this moment was that of the Queen. His heart and his courage had just been put to so severe a test, that despite their firmness they could

hardly withstand a fresh shock. Luckily the Queen did not come.

Then commenced on the part of Anne of Austria a political dissertation on the welcome given by M. Fouquet to the House of France. She intermingled her attacks with compliments addressed to the King, with inquiries as to his health, with little motherly flatteries, and with diplomatic rules.

"Well, my son," said she, "have you arrived at any conclusion regarding M. Fouquet?"

"Saint-Aignan," said Philippe, "be good enough to inquire after the Queen."

At these words, the first that Philippe had uttered aloud, the slight difference between his voice and that of Louis XIV was discernible to the mother's ears; Anne of Austria looked fixedly at her son.

Saint-Aignan left the room. Philippe continued:

"Madame, I do not like to have M. Fouquet spoken ill of, you know that, and you yourself have spoken well of him."

"Everybody thinks too much of himself, here," replied the old Queen. "Nobody thinks of the state. M. Fouquet—it is a fact—M. Fouquet is ruining the state."

"Come, mother," replied Philippe, in a lower tone, "have you also become a buckler for M. Colbert?"

"In what way?" asked the Queen, in surprise.

"Why, in truth," responded Philippe, "you speak like your old friend, Madame de Chevreuse."

At mention of this name, Anne of Austria turned pale and bit her lip. Philippe had aroused the lioness.

"Why do you speak to me of Madame de Chevreuse?" said she, "and what grudge do you bear me to-day?"

Philippe continued: "Is not Madame de Chevreuse always in league against some one? Has she not been to see you, mother?"

"Monsieur, you are speaking to me after such fashion that I could almost believe it was the King, your father."

"My father did not fancy Madame de Chevreuse, and he had reason not to," said the prince; "and for my part, I do not like her any better. And if she wishes to come here, as she did formerly, to sow divisions and dislikes, under the pretence of begging for money, oh, well——"

"Oh, well!" said Anne of Austria, proudly—herself provoking the storm.

"Oh, well," replied the young man, resolutely, "I will drive out of my kingdom Madame de Chevreuse, and with her all the workers of secrets and mysteries."

He had not calculated the effect of that terrible speech.

or perhaps he had wished to judge its effect, like those who suffer from a chronic ailment seek to break the monotony of their pain by pressing upon their wound to induce a keener pain. Anne of Austria was near fainting. Her eyes, open but fixed, ceased to see for a moment. She extended her arms to her other son, who supported her in his embrace without fear of irritating the King.

"Sire," murmured she, "you treat your mother cruelly."

"How, Madame?" replied he. "I am speaking only of Madame de Chevreuse. Does my mother prefer Madame de Chevreuse to the welfare of my state and the safety of my person? Well, I tell you that Madame de Chevreuse has come to France to borrow money, and that she has addressed herself to M. Fouquet to sell him a certain secret."

"A certain secret?" cried Anne of Austria.

"Concerning some pretended thefts committed by the superintendent—which is false," added Philippe. "M. Fouquet spurned her indignantly, preferring the King's favour to all complicity with intriguers. Then Madame de Chevreuse sold the secret to M. Colbert, and, as she is insatiable, and it did not suffice her to have extorted a hundred thousand crowns from that source, she has sought still higher to see if perchance she might discover still deeper springs. Is that true, Madame?"

"You know all, Sire," said the Queen, more troubled than irritated.

"And so," continued Philippe, "I have the right to take note of this fury who comes to my court to plan the dishonour of some and the ruin of others. If God has suffered certain crimes to be committed, and has concealed them in the shadow of His clemency, I cannot allow Madame de Chevreuse the power to counteract the designs of God."

The last part of Philippe's speech had agitated the Queen mother to such an extent that her son pitied her. He took her hand and kissed it tenderly. She did not perceive in that kiss, given despite the revulsions and rancours of the heart, that in it there was pardon for eight years of horrible suffering. Philippe paused for a moment to choke down the emotions which had been aroused. Then with a sort of gaiety he said:

"We will not leave to-day; I have a plan."

And he turned towards the door, hoping to see Aramis, whose absence had commenced to make him uneasy. The Queen mother desired to take her leave.

"Remain a moment, mother," said he. "I wish you to make your peace with M. Fouquet."

"But I bear M. Fouquet no grudge; I only feared for his prodigalities."

"We will put that to rights, and exact nothing from the superintendent save his good qualities."

"Then what is your Majesty looking for?" said Henrietta, who saw the King looking again towards the door, and who desired to lodge a shaft in his heart; for she supposed that he was expecting La Vallière or a letter from her.

"My sister," said the young man, who had guessed her thought, thanks to that marvellous perspicuity which fortune had permitted him to exercise for the time being; "my sister, I am expecting an extremely distinguished man, a most skilful counsellor, whom I wish to present to you and to recommend to your good graces. Ah! Come in, D'Artagnan!"

D'Artagnan appeared.

"What are your Majesty's commands?"

"Where is M. the Bishop of Vannes, your friend?"

"But, Sire——"

"I am expecting him, but he does not come. Institute a search for him."

D'Artagnan remained a moment stupefied; but presently reflecting that Aramis had left Vaux secretly on a mission for the King, he concluded that the King wished the secret preserved.

"Sire," he replied, "does your Majesty absolutely demand that M. d'Herblay be brought before you?"

"Absolutely is not the word," replied Philippe, "I have no such need of him as that; but if he can be found——"

"I imagined so," said D'Artagnan to himself.

"Is this M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes?" said the Queen.

"Yes Madame. It is singular that M. d'Herblay is not here." And he called out: "Please inform M. Fouquet that I desire to speak with him. Oh; before you, before you; do not retire!"

M. de Saint-Aignan returned, bringing the satisfactory news that the Queen had kept her bed only as a means of precaution, and in order to have strength enough to follow all the behests of the King. While search was being made for M. Fouquet and Aramis, the new King continued his tests quietly, and every one—the household, officers, valets—believed him to be the King, so similar were his gestures, voice, and manner. On his part, Philippe, applying to all the faces the minute description furnished by his accomplice, Aramis, so conducted himself as not to arouse a suspicion in the minds of those who surrounded him. Henceforward nothing could disturb the usurper. With what strange facility had Provi-

dence just reversed the loftiest station in the world, and substituted for it the lowliest! Philippe admired this goodness of God in his behalf, and seconded it with all the resources of his well-rounded character. But he felt, at times, as though a shadow were gliding between him and the rays of his new glory. Aramis did not appear.

The conversation had languished in the royal family. Philippe, preoccupied, had forgotten to dismiss his brother and Madame Henrietta. The latter were greatly surprised and began to lose patience. Just then they heard a voice crying out: "This way! this way! Only a few more steps, Sire!"

"M. Fouquet's voice," said D'Artagnan, beside the Queen mother.

"M. d'Herblay cannot be far away," added Philippe.

But what he saw was far removed from what he expected to see. All eyes were turned towards the door through which M. Fouquet was to enter, but it was not he who came in.

A terrible cry resounded from every corner of the room—a cry of distress uttered by King and servants alike. It is not given to men—even to those whose destinies are intermingled with the strongest elements and the most wonderful accidents—to contemplate a scene like the one which offered itself at this moment in the royal chamber.

The half-closed shutters allowed the entry of only an uncertain light, toned down by the heavy velvet curtains, lined with silk. In this softened shadow, one's eyes dilated slowly, and each one of the courtiers saw the others by faith rather than by sight. Nevertheless, in these environments, not one of the details could be overlooked; and the new object which presented itself seemed as luminous as though lighted by the sun.

Thus it was with Louis XIV, when he showed himself, pale and frowning, under the curtain of the secret stairs. Behind him was Fouquet, his countenance stamped with sternness and sorrow.

The two princes, both totally unnerved—for we shall not attempt to depict Philippe's frightful attitude—both trembling and clinching their hands convulsively, measured each other with their glances, while their eyes darted poniard-like shafts into each other's soul. Mute, panting, alert, they seemed about to spring upon an enemy. This astounding resemblance of face, gesture, stature, everything, even to the similarity of costume, caused by accident—for Louis XIV had donned at the Louvre a suit of violet velvet—this perfect analogy of the two princes, brought terror to the heart of Anne of Austria,

and still the truth did not dawn upon her. There are misfortunes in life that nobody will accept. They prefer to believe in the supernatural, the impossible.

Louis had not counted on these obstacles. He expected that he had only to appear in order to be recognised. A living sun, he could not brook the suspicion of equality with any one.

He would not admit anything but that every torch should become extinct the moment his conquering ray was seen. So upon sight of Philippe he was perhaps more terrified than any one around him; and his silence, his immobility, were but intervals of concentration and calm which precede violent explosions of anger.

But Fouquet! who could portray his emotion and stupor in the presence of this living image of his master? Fouquet thought that Aramis was right, that the newcomer was a King as pure of blood as the other, and that, for having repudiated all participation in this *coup d'état*, so skilfully prepared by the Jesuit general, he must be an enthusiastic madman, unworthy ever again of dipping his hands into a political job. Besides, it was the blood of Louis XIII that Fouquet was sacrificing to Louis XIII's blood; it was to a selfish ambition that he was offering up a noble ambition; it was to the right of keeping that he gave up the right of having. The whole extent of his error was revealed to him by the mere sight of the pretender.

All that passed in Fouquet's soul was lost upon the courtiers. He had five minutes in which to concentrate his thoughts on the points at issue with his conscience; five minutes, that is to say, five centuries, in which the two Kings and their family scarcely found time to breathe after so terrible a shock.

D'Artagnan, leaning against the wall opposite Fouquet, his hand on his brow, his eye fixed, asked himself the meaning of so wonderful a prodigy. He could not say immediately why he doubted; but he knew of a truth that he had reason to doubt, and that in this meeting of the two Louis lay all the gist of the matter which for the last few days had rendered the conduct of Aramis so suspicious to the musketeer. However, these ideas were enveloped in thick veils. The actors in the scene seemed to float in the vapours of an uncertain awakening.

Suddenly Louis XIV, more impatient and more accustomed to command, hastened to one of the shutters, opened it and tore away the curtains. A flood of light entered the room, causing Philippe to recoil to an alcove. This movement Louis seized upon eagerly, and turned to the Queen, saying:

"Mother, do you not recognise your son—since every one here has forgotten his King?"

Anne of Austria trembled violently and raised her arms towards Heaven, without being able to utter a word.

"Mother," said Philippe, in an even tone, "do you not know your son?"

And Louis recoiled in his turn.

As for Anne of Austria, she lost all self-control, being stricken by remorse in both head and heart. No one aiding her—for all present were petrified—she sank back on her divan and gave vent to a feeble sigh.

Louis could no longer endure this scene and this affront. He bounded towards D'Artagnan, of whom vertigo was getting the better, and who staggered and clutched at the door for support.

"Your aid, musketeer!" said he. "Look us in the face, and see which is the paler, he or I."

The cry aroused D'Artagnan and stirred in his heart the fibre of obedience. He shook his head, and without hesitating longer, walked up to Philippe, laid his hand on his shoulder, and said:

"Monsieur, you are my prisoner!"

Philippe did not lift his eyes, nor budge from the spot, where he stood as though nailed, his eye deep-set and fixed on the King, his brother. In a sublime moment of silence he reproached him for all his unhappy past and for all the torments of his future. Against this language of the soul the King felt powerless. He lowered his eyes and led away his brother and sister precipitately, forgetting his mother stretched out motionless three paces away from the son whom she allowed, a second time, to be condemned to death. Philippe approached her and said in a gentle voice, but touched with nobleness:

"If I were not your son, I should curse you, my mother, for having made me so miserable."

D'Artagnan felt a shiver pass through the very marrow of his bones. He saluted the young prince respectfully, and said as he bowed:

"Pray excuse me, monseigneur; I am only a soldier and my oaths are to him who has just left the chamber."

"Thank you, M. d'Artagnan. But what has become of M. d'Herblay?"

"M. d'Herblay is in safety, monseigneur," said a voice behind them, "and no one, while I am living and free, shall disturb a hair of his head."

"M. Fouquet!" said the prince, smiling sadly.

"Pardon me, monseigneur," said Fouquet, bending the knee, "but he who has just gone was my guest."

"Here," murmured Philippe, with a sigh, "are brave friends and good hearts. They make me regret the world. Forward, M. d'Artagnan, I am at your service."

Just as the captain of musketeers was on the point of leaving, Colbert appeared, handed D'Artagnan an order from the King, and retired.

D'Artagnan read it and cursed the paper angrily.

"What is it?" asked the prince.

"Read, monseigneur," replied the musketeer.

Philippe read these words, hurriedly traced by the hand of Louis XIV:

> *"M. d'Artagnan will conduct the prisoner to the Ile Sainte-Marguerite. He will cover his face with an iron mask, which the prisoner is not to raise under peril of his life."*

"It is just," said Philippe, resignedly. "I am ready."

"Aramis was right," said Fouquet in an aside to the musketeer; "this one is a King as much as the other."

"More!" replied D'Artagnan; "he needs only you and me."

CHAPTER XXV

Aramis and Porthos, having profited by the time granted them by Fouquet, did honour to the French cavalry by their speed. Porthos did not grasp the nature of the mission which demanded such swiftness, but as he saw Aramis spurring forward furiously, he himself spurred no less furiously. In this manner they soon put a dozen leagues between themselves and Vaux; then it became necessary to change horses and arrange a sort of relay. Aramis' head was on fire; the activity of his body had not yet succeeded in surmounting that of the mind. All that there is in raging anger, poignant toothache, and mortal peril, twisted, gnawed and groaned in the brain of the vanquished prelate. Pale, and at times dripping with steaming perspiration, and again dry and icy, he lashed the horses and lacerated their flanks.

Thus they sped forward for eight weary hours, and finally reached Orléans. Aramis thought that it would not be imprudent to rest, but that to continue was the surer way. Indeed, twenty leagues more covered with the same rapidity.

twenty leagues devoured, and not even D'Artagnan could overtake the enemies of the King. He therefore inflicted upon Porthos the grief of remounting his horse. They hastened on until seven in the evening, when but one more post remained between them and Blois. He recalled that the Comte de la Fère lived nearby.

About nine o'clock they reached Athos' door, guided by the light of a magnificent moon. Porthos and his companion descended before the door of the little château. Athos and Raoul were conversing while walking in the long avenue of lindens in the park, when suddenly the bell, which served to announce to the count either the hour for a repast or a visitor, was rung. Mechanically and without attaching any importance to the summons, he walked back with his son, when at the entrance of the avenue they found themselves facing Porthos and Aramis.

Uttering a cry of joy, Raoul clasped Porthos tenderly in his arms. As for Aramis and Athos, they embraced as old men embrace; indeed, Aramis on his part felt that this embrace was somewhat in the nature of a question, and he said, when it was over:

"My friend, we cannot stay with you very long."

"Ah!" exclaimed the count.

"Only long enough to tell you of my good fortune," added Porthos.

"Ah!" said Raoul.

Athos gazed in silence at Aramis, whose gloomy demeanour seemed to be but little in harmony with the good news announced by Porthos.

The bishop took the count's arm, and after requesting Porthos's leave to talk with him a few moments in private, said:

"My dear Athos, I am heart-broken."

"Heart-broken!" cried the count; "my dear friend!"

"A few words will explain my position. I have conspired against the King; the conspiracy has failed, and I have no doubt but that I am the object of pursuit at the present moment."

"Pursuit! conspiracy! My dear friend, what is this you are saying?"

"The sad truth—I am simply ruined. Believing that failure was impossible, I have drawn Porthos into the conspiracy. Without the slightest idea of what it was all about, he flung himself into it with all his energy, as, indeed, you know he does into every enterprise; and now that he has compromised himself with me, he is as completely ruined as I am."

"Good God?"

And Athos turned round to look at Porthos, who was smiling at them genially.

"But I had best let you know everything. Listen," continued Aramis.

And he related the facts with which we are already acquainted.

At several points in the narrative Athos could feel the perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

"It was a great idea," said he; "but it was a great fault. What do you reckon on doing?"

"I am taking Porthos away with me. Never will the King be brought to believe that the honest fellow has acted in perfect innocence; never will he be brought to believe that Porthos thought all the time that he was serving the King His head would pay for my fault. I am determined that that shall never be."

"Where are you taking him?"

"To Belle-Isle, first. It is an impregnable refuge. From there I can sail, either to England, where I am in touch with a good many people——"

"To England? You say you are——"

"Yes. Or else to Spain, where I am in touch with more people still. Once in Spain, I have the means of healing the breach between myself and Louis XIV and enabling Porthos to regain his favour also. And now, give me your two best horses to gain the second post, as I have been refused any, the pretext given being that M. de Beaufort is making a tour in these quarters."

"You shall have my two best horses, Aramis, and—take care of Porthos!"

"Nothing can befall our brother Porthos, count, that does not also befall me," answered Aramis, in the same tone.

Athos bowed as he shook hands with Aramis; then he embraced Porthos with great emotion.

"I was born to good luck, was I not?" murmured Porthos, in a state of ecstasy, wrapping his cloak about him.

"Come along, my dear fellow," said Aramis.

Raoul had gone out to see to the saddling of the horses and to give other orders.

The group had now broken up. When Athos saw his two friends on the point of starting, something like a mist passed across his eyes and weighed upon his heart.

The count stood gazing after them, their forms in their white cloaks elongated in the darkness as they rode along the highway. Like two phantoms they seemed to loom up larger

as they rose from the earth; the fog did not hide them, and they were in sight until they disappeared in the declivity of the ground. At the end of the perspective it looked as if both, with a sudden spring, had leaped into the air and vanished among the clouds.

Then Athos returned to the house feeling terribly dejected.

"Raoul," said he, "something or other tells me that I have seen these two men for the last time."

CHAPTER XXVI

Two days later Raoul, accompanied by his father, presented himself before M. le Duc de Beaufort in Paris. The admiral of France was preparing an expedition to Africa.

"I would like, M. le Duc, to go with you to Djidgelli," Raoul said, "and I have the honour of thanking you for having offered me a Commission."

"Aha!" cried M. de Beaufort; "so you have brought me my aide-de-camp. This way, count; this way, viscount."

Athos was trying to make his way through a pile of linen and plate.

"Oh, step over it," said the duke.

"Here is your commission," he said to Raoul. "I was so sure of you that I had it made out before. You will go in advance of me to Antibes."

"Very well, monseigneur."

"A number of tenders and lighters must be in attendance to escort me and carry my supplies. The present order gives you the right to visit and search all the islands along the coast. You will carry off and enroll all the men needed."

"Yes, M. le Duc."

"And since you are active and have a good deal of work before you, you'll have to spend a large amount of money."

"I hope not, monseigneur."

"I hope the contrary. My intendant has prepared orders for a thousand livres each to be levied on the towns in the south. You will have a hundred of them. You can now go, my dear viscount."

"Monseigneur, permit us to bid you good-bye."

"Go, then, and may my good fortune wait upon you!"

"Adieu, monseigneur, and may your usual good fortune wait upon you also!"

"The expedition has begun nicely," said Athos to his son. "No supplies, no reserves, no storage vessels; what can any one do in such a case? And now let us start, Raoul; the

weather is beautiful and the sky is pure. A still purer sky will shine above you at Djidgelli; it will speak to you of me there, as it speaks to me of God here."

The two gentlemen then proceeded on their way, in obedience to their will rather than to their destiny.

The journey was in itself a pleasant one. Athos and his son travelled at the rate of fifteen leagues a day, though sometimes they rode faster, when the grief of Raoul increased in intensity. It took them a fortnight to reach Toulon.

Raoul was in utter despair at the prospect of not meeting D'Artagnan. His tender heart longed to bid adieu to that heart of steel, and derive consolation from it. However, when Raoul had set to work sorting out vessels for the flotilla and collecting the lighters and tenders he was to send to Toulon, one of the fishermen informed the count that his boat was laid up for repairs ever since a trip he had made with a gentleman who had been in a great hurry to embark.

Athos believed the fellow to be lying, for he would earn more money at fishing if he were left at home when all his comrades were away. He insisted, therefore, upon having the details.

The fisherman informed him that, about six days before, a man came to hire his boat during the night for a trip to the Isle of Saint-Honorat. His terms were agreed to. But when the gentleman arrived he had with him a huge carriage chest and wanted to embark it, although it was almost impossible to do so. The fisherman tried to draw out of the bargain. But all his protests and threats got for him was a shower of blows from the gentleman, who beat him black and blue with his cane. The fisherman, in a towering rage, had recourse to the syndic of his guild at Antibes, the members of which administer justice among themselves and protect one another. Thereupon the gentleman exhibited a certain paper, and at the sight of it the syndic bowed to the very ground, ordered the fisherman to obey, and scolded him for not having done so before. Then they started with the freight on board.

"But all this does not tell me," interrupted Athos, "how it was that you ran aground."

"I'm going to do so. I steered for Saint-Honorat, in obedience to the gentleman's orders; but he changed his mind and ordered me to land him at Sainte-Marguerite."

"Well?"

"Well, monsieur," cried the fisherman, in his strong Provençal accent, "a fellow is a sailor or he isn't. He knows his course, or he is nothing but a lubber. The gentleman caught me by the throat and threatened to strangle me. I was going

to fling my hatchet at his head, and had a right to do so, monsieur, hadn't I? A sailor is as much master on his own deck as a citizen is in his own chamber. I was going, then, to defend myself, and cut my fine gentleman in two, when suddenly—you may believe me or not, as you like, monsieur—that big box opened of itself, I can't tell how, and out of it came a sort of ghost in a black helmet and a black mask, a frightful object, and it threatened us with its fist."

"It was?" asked Athos.

"The devil, monsieur! for the gentleman cried out joyfully: 'Ah! thanks, monseigneur!'"

"It is strange!" murmured the count, with a glance at Raoul.

"What did you do next?" inquired the latter.

"Why, as it was, two poor fellows like us were anything but a match for two gentlemen; but a match for the devil——! Oh, my comrade and I never said a single word to each other, but made one jump into the sea. Luckily, we were within seven or eight hundred feet of shore."

"And then?"

"And then, monsieur, a breeze sprang up from the south-west, and the boat veered round and grounded on the sands of Sainte-Marguerite."

"Yes. But the two travellers?"

"Bah! don't be put out about them. We soon had a proof that one of them was the devil and protected the other fellow; for when we swam out to the boat, expecting to find these two creatures killed or stunned by the shock, we found nothing, not even the carriage."

"Strange! strange!" repeated the count. "And what did you do next, my friend?"

"Complained to the governor of Sainte-Marguerite, who shook his fist in my face and told me if I repeated such silly stories he would have me flogged for my pains."

"The governor said so?"

"Ah, that he did, monsieur; and yet my boat was broken, regularly smashed, monsieur, for the prow of it is yonder on Sainte-Marguerite's point, and the carpenter has asked a hundred and twenty francs for repairing it."

"Very well," said Raoul, "you will be exempted from service. You may go."

"Should you care to take a trip to Sainte-Marguerite?" inquired Athos.

"Yes, monsieur; there is something to be cleared up about this matter. That fellow does not impress me as having told the truth."

"Nor me, either, Raoul. I should not wonder if the tale of the masked man and the vanished carriage was invented to hide the violence which this rustic may have offered to his passenger in the open sea, as a punishment for his obstinacy in insisting on embarking."

"I have suspected as much; and the carriage was more likely to contain valuables than a man."

"We'll see to that, Raoul. The gentleman described certainly bears a close resemblance to D'Artagnan. That is the way in which he would be sure to act. Alas! we are no longer the young invincibles of other days! Who knows but that the hatchet or iron bar of this wretched fisherman may have succeeded in doing what balls and bullets and the finest swords in Europe have not been able to do for forty years."

On the same day they embarked for Sainte-Marguerite on a *chasse-marée,* which had come from Toulon under orders.

The impression they felt on drawing near their destination was very singular. The island was fairly covered with fruit and flowers; the part which was cultivated being used as a garden by the governor. Smugglers were allowed to use it as a temporary warehouse under the protection of the governor, who divided their gains with them, but only on condition that they did not kill the game or plunder his garden. Having made this arrangement, the governor was satisfied with eight soldiers as a garrison for his fortress, in which a dozen cannon were slowly rusting. So this particular governor was a lucky husbandman, harvesting his wine, oil, figs, and oranges, and soaking his limes and lemons in the sunlight that shone on his casements.

The fortress, encircled by a deep fosse, its sole defence, lifted to the heavens its three heads, or rather its three turrets, which were connected by moss-clad terraces.

Athos and Raoul wandered for a time round the garden fences, vainly looking for some one who might usher them into the governor's presence. At last they stepped into the garden. Athos saw no one on the terrace, between the second and third turret, except a soldier who carried a basket of provisions on his head. This man soon returned without the basket, and speedily vanished in the depths of his sentry box.

Athos concluded he must have been carrying his dinner to some one, and, having done so, had come back to his own. Suddenly he heard a cry, and, on raising his head, perceived in the frame of the bars of a window something white, something like a hand waving, something dazzling, too, like a weapon reflecting the sunlight.

And before he could form a clear notion of what he had

just seen, a luminous trail, accompanied by a whizzing sound, brought back his attention from the donjon to the ground. Then a second dull sound came to his ears from the fosse, and Raoul ran and picked up a silver dish which had just rolled down to the dry sand. The hand which had hurled this dish made a sign to the two gentlemen, and then disappeared.

Raoul and Athos drew near each other and earnestly examined the dish, which was soiled with dust. They discovered at the bottom of it certain characters that had been traced with the point of a knife.

"I am," said the inscription, "the brother of the King of France, a prisoner to-day, a madman to-morrow. French gentlemen and Christians, pray to God for the soul and for the reason of the son of your masters!"

The dish fell from the hands of Athos, while Raoul was meditating on the significance of these dismal words.

At the same instant there was a shout from the top of the donjon. Raoul, quick as lightning, bent his head and forced down that of his father also. The barrel of a musket had just gleamed above the crest of the parapet. A white smoke spurted like a plume from the musket's mouth, and a ball was flattened against a rock within six inches of the two gentlemen. Another musket then made its appearance and was pointed at them.

"*Cordieux!*" shouted Athos, "are you assassins, then? Come down, cowards, and show yourselves!"

The man who was about to fire the musket answered these exclamations with a cry of surprise, and when his companion, determined to continue the attack, seized the loaded weapon, the man who had uttered the cry struck it up, and the shot passed through the air harmlessly.

On seeing these two men disappear from the platform, Athos and Raoul imagined they were coming to fall upon them, and they awaited the assault firmly.

Before five minutes had slipped by, a drum was beat which summoned the eight soldiers of the garrison, who presently appeared, with their muskets, on the other side of the fosse. At their head was an officer whom Athos and Raoul recognised as the man who had fired the first musket This man ordered the soldiers to "make ready."

"They're going to shooot us!" cried Raoul. "Let us draw our swords, at least, and jump over the fosse. We shall kill two of these villains when their muskets are empty."

And Raoul, suiting the action to the word, was springing forward, followed by Athos, when a well-known voice echoed behind them

"Athos! Raoul!" it cried.

"D'Artagnan!" answered the two gentlemen.

"Recover arms, *mordioux*!" shouted the captain to the soldiers. "I knew very well what I was talking about a moment ago!"

The soldiers obeyed.

"But what is the meaning of all this?" inquired Athos. "Are people shot here without notice?"

"Yes, I was going to fire at you, and, though the governor might have missed you, I should not have done so, my dear friends. How lucky it is that I have contracted the habit of taking a long aim, instead of firing instinctively when I do take aim! And then I fancied I recognised you. Ah! my friends, what a piece of good fortune that was!"

And D'Artagnan brushed the perspiration from his forehead, for he had run fast, and his agitation was anything but feigned.

"What! was the person who fired on us the governor of the fortress?"

"The very man."

"And why did he do so? What have we done to him?"

"*Pardieu!* you picked up what the prisoner threw to you."

"We did."

"That dish—the prisoner wrote something on the bottom of it, did he not?"

"Yes."

"I suspected as much. Oh, God!"

And D'Artagnan, with all the marks of the most intense anxiety, took the dish and read the inscription. When he had finished, his face turned livid.

"Oh, God!" he repeated. "Hush! the governor is approaching!"

"Well, and what then? What have we done?" said Raoul.

"So it is true?" whispered Athos; "it is true?"

"Hush! I tell you, hush! If it is known that you can read, if it is suspected that you have understood—you know how I love you—my dear friends, you know I would lay down my life for you—but——"

"But——" said Athos and Raoul.

"I might save you from death, but I could not save you from eternal imprisonment. Silence, then; not a word!"

The governor came up, having crossed the fosse on a plank bridge.

"Well," he called to D'Artagnan, "why this delay?"

"You are Spaniards, you do not know a word of French," the captain whispered hurriedly to his friends. "Well," he answered, aloud, addressing the governor. "I was right

These gentlemen are Spanish officers whose acquaintance I made last year at Ypres. They don't know a word of French."

"Indeed!" said the governor, examining them suspiciously. Then he tried to read the inscription on the dish.

D'Artagnan tore it out of his hands and effaced the characters with the point of his sword.

"What are you doing there?" cried the governor. "So you will not allow me to read it?"

"It is a state secret," answered D'Artagnan, bluntly, "and you know that, by the King's order, the penalty of death awaits anyone who discovers it. If you like, then, I'll let you read it, and have you shot immediately afterward."

The tone in which he uttered this address was partly serious and partly ironical. Meanwhile, Athos and Raoul observed the most indifferent and unconcerned silence.

"But surely," said the governor, "these gentlemen must have understood at least some of the words."

"Oh, nonsense! even if they understood words they heard, they never would understand words that are written. They could not read them, even if they were written in Spanish. Remember that it is a fault in a noble Spaniard to know how to read."

The governor had to be contented with this explanation, but he was persistent.

"Invite these gentlemen to enter the fort," said he.

"With pleasure; I was about to propose doing so myself," answered D'Artagnan.

The fact is, the captain was not about to propose anything of the kind, and was wishing his friends a hundred leagues away. But he had to put the best face on the matter he could. He addressed an invitation to the two gentlemen in Spanish, which they accepted.

The party thereupon proceeded toward the entrance to the fort, and, the incident having been explained, the eight soldiers returned to the pleasant idleness which had for a moment been disturbed by this unheard-of adventure.

CHAPTER XXVII

When they had entered the fort, and while the governor was making some preparations for the reception of his guests, Athos said to D'Artagnan:

"Come, now, let us have an explanation while we are alone."

"The explanation is simple enough," answered the musketeer. "I have conducted to the island a prisoner whom the King does not allow to be seen. You came hither, and he threw something to you out of the window. I was dining with the governor, saw the object, and saw Raoul pick it up. It does not take me long to understand what is going on before my eyes. I understood, and I believed there was some collusion between you and the prisoner. Thereupon——"

"You ordered us to be shot."

"*Ma foi!* I confess it. But if I was the first to seize a musket, luckily I was the last to aim at you."

"If you had killed me, D'Artagnan, I should have had the good fortune to die for the royal house of France and by the hand of its noblest and most loyal defender."

"Upon my word! What rubbish is this you're talking about 'the royal house'?" stammered D'Artagnan. "What! a man of your wisdom and common sense to believe the nonsense written by a lunatic!"

"Yes, I believe it."

"Oh, come now, Athos, get rid of these childish fancies, or I must cease to regard you as a sober-minded person. Will you have the goodness to explain to me how Louis XIII could have a son at Sainte-Marguerite?"

"You had better ask Aramis," replied Athos, coolly.

"Aramis!" exclaimed the musketeer, quite dumbfounded. "You have seen Aramis?"

"After his misadventure at Vaux, yes; I saw him at a time when he was a fugitive, an outcast, a ruined man, and he told me enough to lead me to believe in the truth of the complaints engraved by that hapless youth on the bottom of the silver dish."

D'Artagnan dropped his head on his breast, in a state of utter dejection.

"And it is thus," said he, "that God mocks at what men are pleased to call their wisdom! A fine secret, truly, is that of which a dozen or fifteen men hold all the fragments! Athos, cursed be the chance which has brought us face to face in this affair, for now——"

"Well," replied Athos, with his usual gentle gravity, "is your secret lost because I am acquainted with it? Have I never borne a weight as heavy during my life? Have you lost your memory, my dear fellow?"

"You have never borne a secret so perilous," rejoined D'Artagnan, sadly. "I have a kind of sinister feeling that every one connected with this secret will die, and die miserably."

"God's will be done, D'Artagnan! But here comes your governor."

D'Artagnan and his friends again took up their parts.

This governor, a harsh and distrustful man, was more than polite, was obsequious to D'Artagnan. He contented himself with offering hospitality to the travellers, and keeping a vigilant eye on them at the same time.

They rose from table, and retired to seek some repose.

"What is that man's name? I do not like his looks," said Athos to D'Artagnan, in Spanish.

"De Saint-Mars," replied the captain.

"Is he to be the young prince's jailer?"

"Eh? how can I tell? For all I know, I may be kept here myself for ever."

"Still," observed Raoul, "the very fact that you know nothing for certain proves that your stay here will be temporary, and that you will return to Paris."

"Pray ask these gentlemen," interrupted Saint-Mars, "why they visited Sainte-Marguerite."

"Because there is, they were informed, a Benedictine monastery at Saint-Honorat well worth seeing, and because they heard the shooting in Sainte-Marguerite was very fine."

"It is at their services," answered Saint-Mars, "as well as at yours."

D'Artagnan thanked him.

"When do they leave?" added the governor.

"To-morrow," replied D'Artagnan.

M. de Saint-Mars went to make his rounds, and left the musketeer alone with the two pretended Spaniards.

"And now," inquired the musketeer, "would you be pleased to answer the question put to you by that gloomy-looking fellow Saint-Mars? Why have you visited Sainte-Marguerite?"

"To bid you farewell."

"To bid me farewell? What do you mean? Is Raoul going anywhere?"

"Yes."

"With M. de Beaufort?"

"With M. de Beaufort. You can guess at everything, my dear friend."

"Oh, mere habit."

While the two friends were conversing, Raoul had sat down, with head heavy and heart bursting, on a moss-clad stone, his musket across his knees, his eyes, now on the sky, now on the sea, so absorbed in listening to the voice of his soul that the two were soon far away from him without his noticing it.

D'Artagnan remarked on his absence.

"Still wounded?" said he to Athos.

"To the death!"

"Look at Raoul, my friend, you who love him," added Athos, pointing to his son. "You see in his face a sadness that will never leave it. Can you imagine anything more awful than to be forced to witness, hour by hour and minute by minute, the incessant agony of that poor heart?"

"Let me speak to him, Athos. Something may come of it."

"Try; but I am convinced you will not succeed."

"I will not offer to console, but to serve him."

"You will?"

"Undoubtedly. Do you believe a woman has never repented her faithlessness before? I will go to him, I tell you."

Athos shook his head, and continued his walk alone. D'Artagnan cut through the brushwood, reached Raoul, and offered him his hand.

"Well," inquired he, "you have something to say to me?"

"I have to ask you to do me a service," answered Bragelonne.

"Ask it."

"You will return to France, some day or other?"

"I hope so."

"Ought I to write to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"She loves the King," said D'Artagnan, roughly; "she is an honest girl."

Raoul started.

"Then that decides me, my dear D'Artagnan."

"To go and see her?"

"No, to go where I can never see her; for I would love her for ever."

"To speak frankly," rejoined the musketeer, "that is a conclusion I little expected."

"Hold, my friend. You will see her, and you will give her this letter, which will explain to you what is passing in my heart. Read it; I prepared it last night. Something told me I should see you to-day."

D'Artagnan read the letter.

"Your letter is all right," he said. "I have only one fault to find with it. It tells everything except the thing that exhales a deadly poison from your eyes and from your heart; everything except the insane passion that is still burning you."

Raoul turned pale and was silent.

"Why did you not write merely these words:

"'*Mademoiselle: Instead of cursing you, I still love you, and I die.*'"

"You are right," said Raoul, with a sinister joy.

And tearing the letter he had received back from D'Artagnan, he wrote on a leaf of his tablets:

"In order to have the happiness of telling you I still love you I am guilty of the baseness of writing to you; and to punish myself for that baseness, I die."

And he sighed.

"You will give her these tablets, captain?" said he.

"When?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"On the day," said Bragelonne, pointing to the last phrase, "on the day you write the date under these words."

And he abruptly left the musketeer and ran up to Athos, who was slowly returning.

When they came back to the fort, the sea rose with that sudden violence which is so frequent during the unforeseen squalls that trouble the Mediterranean, when the ill-humour of the elements quickly changes to an angry storm.

"What is that over yonder?" asked Athos. "A wrecked boat?"

"It is not a boat," answered D'Artagnan.

"Excuse me," interposed Raoul, "it is a boat, and it is rapidly gaining the harbour."

"Yes, there is a boat entering the creek, I see, and it did well to seek shelter; but what Athos is pointing to in the sands is not a boat, though it has run aground."

"Yes, yes, I see it."

"It is the carriage I threw into the sea when I landed with my prisoner."

"Take my advice, then, and burn that carriage, so that no trace of it may remain," said Athos. "Otherwise the Antibes fishermen, who believe that they have had a tussle with the devil, may succeed in proving that your prisoner was only a man."

"Your suggestion is worth attending to, and I will have it carried out, or, rather, carry it out myself to-night. But come in at once; we are going to have a rain storm, and the lightning is terrific."

As they were passing over the ramparts to the gallery of which D'Artagnan had the key, they saw M. de Saint-Mars on his way to the prisoner's apartment. At a sign from D'Artagnan they concealed themselves in an angle of the staircase.

"What is the matter?" asked Athos.

"You'll see. Look. The prisoner is about to return from chapel."

And by the glare of the red flashes of lightning against the fog stamped with violet on the skyey background, they saw pass gravely, at six paces behind the governor, a man in black and masked by a visor of burnished steel soldered to a helmet of the same material, so that his head was entirely concealed. The fires that were darting through the heavens were reflected in red flashes on this polished surface, which flew off capriciously, seeming like wrathful looks, hurled at mankind by this unhappy wretch, instead of imprecations.

The prisoner halted for a moment in the middle of the gallery, to contemplate the infinite horizon before him, breathe the odours of the sulphurous tempest, and drink in greedily the warm rain. Then he heaved a sigh that was like a roar.

"Come along, monsieur," said Saint-Mars to the prisoner, roughly, for he had grown uneasy at seeing him gaze so long beyond the walls; "come on, monsieur, I say!"

"Say *monseigneur!*" shouted Athos from his corner, in a voice so solemn and terrible that the governor shivered from head to foot.

It was a principle with Athos to insist on respect for fallen majesty.

The prisoner turned round.

"Who spoke?" asked Saint-Mars.

"I," replied D'Artagnan, showing himself. "You know well that such is the order."

"Call me neither monseigneur nor monsieur," said the prisoner, in a voice that thrilled Raoul to the very depths of his soul. "Call me ACCURSED!"

And he passed on.

The iron door creaked behind him.

"An unfortunate man, indeed!" murmured the musketeer, in a hollow voice, pointing out to Raoul the chamber inhabited by the prince.

They were returning to D'Artagnan's apartment when one of the soldiers announced that the governor wanted to see him.

The vessel which Raoul had perceived at sea, and which was in such a hurry to enter the creek, had come to Sainte-Marguerite with an important despatch for the captain of the musketeers. As soon as D'Artagnan opened it he recognised the King's handwriting.

"*I think,*" said Louis XIV, "*that you must have, by this time, executed my orders, M. d'Artagnan. Return, then, immediately, and join me at the Louvre.*"

"So now my exile is over!" cried the musketeer, joyfully.

"Thank God I am no longer a jailer! You will take advantage of the boat which is to take me to Antibes?"

"With all my heart," said Athos. "We cannot get too soon or too far away from the fortress and the spectacle which saddened us just now."

The three friends, then, quitted the island, first bidding good-bye to the governor, and saw for the last time the walls of the fortress, which loomed up white in the last flashes of the expiring storm.

D'Artagnan took leave of his friends that very night, after witnessing the burning of the carriage by order of M. de Saint-Mars, who had followed his instructions. He held them in a long and silent embrace, without giving vent to the sigh that was bursting his breast. Then he galloped away swiftly, plunging both the rowels into the flanks of his maddened steed.

Athos and Raoul returned to Toulon.

CHAPTER XXVIII

When D'Artagnan, who always kept on galloping as well as thinking, alighted in Paris, his muscles were as supple and elastic as those of the athlete who had been preparing for the gymnasium.

The King had not expected him so soon and had just started on a hunting expedition in the direction of Meudon. Instead of following him, as he would have done once, D'Artagnan had his boots pulled off, took a bath, and waited till his Majesty should return, tired and dusty. He spent the next five hours in looking about him—finding out the lay of the land, as it were—and in arming himself against all evil chances.

He learned that the King had been very gloomy during the last fortnight and the Queen mother was ill and dejected; that Monsieur, the King's brother, seemed inclined to turn pious; that Madame had the vapours; and that M. de Guiche had gone to one of his estates.

Then D'Artagnan thought of that hopeless letter which poor Raoul had written to a woman who had spent her life in hoping, and since D'Artagnan was fond of philosophising, he resolved to turn the King's absence to account by conversing for a few moments with Madame de la Vallière.

He had no difficulty in finding her; she was surrounded by a very large circle. In her apparent solitude the King's favourite—just as if she were a queen, and more than if she

were a queen, perhaps—received the homage of which Madame had been so proud when the King had eyes only for her and the eyes of the courtiers had followed the eyes of the King.

As soon as D'Artagnan appeared, the maids of honour plied him with questions. Where had he been? What had become of him? How was it they had not seen him caracoling on his fiery steed to the wondering admiration of the spectators in the King's balcony?

He replied that he had come back from the land of oranges.

"From the land of oranges?" cried Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente; "from Spain?"

"Mademoiselle," answered D'Artagnan, "I will not put you to the trouble of guessing further. I have come from the country where M. de Beaufort has embarked on his way to Algiers."

"Were any of our friends there?" inquired Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, quietly, but yet in such a way as to attract attention to a question that was put with a motive.

"Yes," answered D'Artagnan, "M. de la Guillotière, M. de Mouchy, and M. de Bragelonne."

La Vallière turned pale.

Athenaïs was not contented with making La Vallière pale, she was resolved to make her red also.

Without much regard for propriety, she continued:

"Are you aware, Louise, that you have a very big sin on your conscience?"

Louise pressed her hand on her ice-cold temples.

"And if he is killed," continued this pitiless persecutor, "you will have killed him; that is your sin."

Louise, who was ready to drop, tottered over and took the arm of D'Artagnan, whose face betrayed unusual emotion.

"You wish to speak with me, M. d'Artagnan?" said she, in tones that faltered from anger and grief. "What is it you have to say to me?"

D'Artagnan walked with her along the gallery, then, when they were out of earshot:

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente," he answered, "has just expressed everything I had to say to you, mademoiselle, though in a very harsh manner."

She uttered a faint cry, and, struck to the heart by this fresh arrow, she acted like the poor bird which, when wounded to the death, seeks the shade of a thicket to die. She disappeared through a door, just as the King was entering by another. The first glance of the prince was directed to the vacant seat of his mistress; not perceiving La Vallière, he frowned. Then he saw D'Artagnan, who bowed.

"Ah! monsieur," said he, "you have made good speed and I am pleased with you."

When they were beyond the reach of curious ears:

"Well, M. d'Artagnan," he continued, "the prisoner?"

"In his prison, Sire."

"What did he say on the way?"

"Nothing, Sire."

"What did he do?"

"Well, the fishermen who were taking me to Sainte-Marguerite revolted and did their best to kill me. The—the prisoner, instead of escaping, defended me."

The King grew pale.

"I have summoned you, M. le Capitaine," said he, "to prepare lodgings for me at Nantes."

"At Nantes?" cried D'Artagnan. "Does your Majesty's court go with you?"

"Of course."

"Then you will need the musketeers, Sire, I presume?"

And the keen eyes of the captain compelled the King to lower his.

"Take a brigade," replied Louis.

"Very well, Sire, I shall start to-morrow."

"To Nantes!" he said to himself, as he came downstairs. "Why had he not the courage to say at once, 'To Belle-Isle'?"

Just as he had reached the grand door one of M. de Brienne's clerks came running after him.

"Excuse me, M. d'Artagnan!" he cried.

"What is the matter, M. Ariste?"

"An order which the King has requested me to give you."

"On your department?" inquired the musketeer.

"No, monsieur, on M. Fouquet's."

D'Artagnan was surprised. He read the order, which was in the King's handwriting, and was for two hundred pistoles.

"Well, well," he thought, after courteously thanking M. de Brienne's clerk, "so he's going to make Fouquet pay the expenses of the journey! *Mordioux!* there's a touch of Louis XI in that! Why did he not make the order payable at the office of M. Colbert? Colbert would have paid it with such pleasure!"

D'Artagnan, faithful to his principle of never letting an order at sight grow cold, started at once for M. Fouquet's residence, so as to pocket his two hundred pistoles as soon as possible.

The superintendent had no doubt received tidings of the approaching visit to Nantes, for he was giving a farewell dinner to his friends.

On his left was Madame de Bellière; on his right, Madame Fouquet; as if, braving the world's laws and despising vulgar conventionalities, the two guardian angels of this man had come together to support him with their interlaced arms at this critical moment.

The captain entered courteously. Then, when with his infallible glance he had read the meaning of the expression on every face, he was seized with wonder and admiration.

Rising up on his armchair, Fouquet said:

"Pardon me, M. d'Artagnan, for not going out to receive you, as you have come in the King's name."

And he dwelt on the closing words with a melancholy firmness which chilled the hearts of his friends with terror.

"Monseigneur," replied D'Artagnan, "I have come in the King's name, but only to request you to have an order cashed for two hundred pistoles."

Every one felt relieved; but Fouquet's brow remained overcast still.

"It will be made in gold," he said, making a sign to his intendant, who went out, taking the order with him.

"Oh," answered D'Artagnan, "I was not uneasy about the payment; the house is a good one."

A painful smile flitted over Fouquet's pallid features.

"Are you in pain?" inquired Madame de Bellière.

"I am troubled with tertian fever; I caught it after the fête at Vaux."

But D'Artagnan knew the terrible secret. He and Fouquet were the only ones there who knew it, and one of them had not the courage to show his pity for the other, and the other had not the right to complain.

The captain, on receiving the two hundred pistoles, was about to take his leave, when Fouquet, rising, seized a glass and ordered one to be given to D'Artagnan.

"To the King's health, monsieur," said he, "whatever happen!"

"And to yours, monseigneur, whatever happen!" said D'Artagnan, draining off the glass.

After these ominous words he bowed to the company, who rose as soon as he had done so. Then they listened until the tramping of his boots and the jingling of his spurs died away at the foot of the stairs.

"I believed for a moment it was myself and not my money he was after," said Fouquet, attempting to laugh.

"You!" cried his friends. "In God's name, why?"

"My friends," continued Fouquet, lowering his voice, "what was I formerly? What am I now? Consult among yourselves

and answer. A man like me sinks when he ceases to rise. What shall we say, then, when he really sinks? I have no longer either money or credit; I have no longer anything but powerful enemies and powerless friends."

"Then," cried Pélisson, rising abruptly, "since you are so frank with us, we should be frank also. Yes, you are ruined; moreover, you are running to court your ruin. Halt! And, first of all, how much money have you left?"

"Seven hundred thousand livres," answered the superintendent.

"Well, I think I have a plan that will reconcile everything," cried Pélisson. "You'll set out for Nantes."

Fouquet stared at him in surprise.

"But in your carriage as far as Orleans, in your galley as far as Nantes. You will be in a position to defend yourself if you are attacked, to escape if you are threatened. You will carry your money with you, to be prepared for every emergency; and, while flying, you have done nothing but obey the King. Then, reaching the sea whenever you wish, you will sail for Belle-Isle, and from Belle-Isle you can dart for whatever point you choose, like the eagle which rushes into space when he has been dislodged from his eyrie."

Pélisson's words were approved unanimously.

"Yes, do it," said Madame Fouquet to her husband.

"Do it," said Madame de Bellière.

"Do it, do it!" cried all the friends.

"I will," answered Fouquet.

"To-night?"

"In an hour?"

"Immediately."

"With seven hundred thousand livres you will make a new fortune," said the Abbé Fouquet. "What can prevent you from fitting out privateers at Belle-Isle?"

"And, if need be, we'll go and discover a new world," added La Fontaine, intoxicated with enthusiasm.

A knock at the door interrupted this concert of joy and hope.

"A courier from the King!" announced the master of ceremonies.

A profound silence fell upon the company, as if the message brought by the courier were but the answer to all the plans that had sprung into existence a moment before. Every one awaited the action of the master, whose face was streaming with perspiration, and who undoubtedly, at this moment, was in a state of high fever. Fouquet passed into his cabinet to receive his Majesty's message. A moment later he summoned

Gourville, who crossed the gallery, while every one waited anxiously for what should happen next.

At last the superintendent appeared among his guests, but not with the same pale, downcast face with which he had left them. That face was now wan, livid, deathlike. Like a living spectre, he advanced, with arms extended, with parched lips, a ghost returned to greet the friends of other days.

"For God's sake, what has happened?" he was asked.

Fouquet opened his right hand, which was damp and trembling; it held a paper which Pélisson pounced on in terror. He read the following lines in the King's hand:

"'Dear and Well beloved M. Fouquet:

"'Give us, out of what you still have belonging to us, the sum of seven hundred thousand livres, which we need to-day for our departure. And as we know your health is not good, we pray God for your recovery and entreat Him to have you in His holy keeping.

"'LOUIS.

"'The present letter will serve as a receipt.'"

A terrified murmur ran through the hall.

"Well, then," cried Pélisson, "you have the letter?"

"Yes, I have the receipt."

"What will you do then?"

"Nothing, since I have the receipt."

"But——"

"If I have the receipt it is because I have paid the money," answered Fouquet, with a simplicity that spread consternation among the spectators.

"You have paid it?" cried Madame Fouquet, wringing her hands; "then we are ruined!"

"Oh, a truce to this, words are useless," interrupted Pélisson. "The money is gone; but there is still life. To horse monseigneur, to horse!"

"What! leave us?" exclaimed the two women, wild with grief.

"Monseigneur, by saving yourself you save us. To horse!"

Pélisson ran down to have the carriages put to.

And all the time the tearful and scared friends of the superintendent were pouring into Gourville's hat gold and silver, their last offering, the pious alms given to misfortune by poverty.

Dragged along by some and carried by others, Fouquet was at length shut up in his carriage. Gourville climbed to the box and seized the reins; Pélisson was holding up Madame Fouquet who had fainted.

Madame de Bellière showed more self-control; she was well paid for it—she received Fouquet's last kiss.

Pélisson found an easy explanation for this hurried departure in the fact that the orders of the King had summoned his ministers to Nantes.

CHAPTER XXIX

D'Artagnan had set off; Fouquet was gone also, and with a speed the affectionate fears of his friends were constantly accelerating. The first moments of the superintendent's journey —or rather flight—were troubled by the terror which the sight of every horse and every carriage seen in the rear of the fugitive produced. But little by little every apprehension vanished. The superintendent's carriage had travelled so fast, and there was soon such a distance between Fouquet and his persecutors, that none of them could be reasonably expected to overtake him. As to his position, his friends had given it the best possible colour. Was he not travelling to join the King at Nantes? Did not the very speed at which he was going testify to his zeal?

He arrived, fatigued but reassured, at Orléans, where, thanks to the efforts of the courier sent in advance, he found a fine eight-oared galley ready for him. Fouquet entered the galley, which set out at once. The current and the rowers wafted him along as wings waft the bird; he arrived before Beaugency, without any accident occurring to mar the voyage.

Fouquet hoped to be the first to arrive at Nantes; in that case he could visit the notables, and might gain the support of the principal members of the States; he would make himself necessary, a thing easy enough in a man of his genius, and would retard the catastrophe, if he did not succeed in averting it entirely.

"Moreover," said Gourville, "you will be able to fathom the designs of your enemies, or, if you will not, we shall. We will have horses ready to carry us to the fastnesses of Poitou, a boat to gain the sea, and, once at sea, Belle-Isle is our inviolable port. You can see for yourself, too, that we are neither watched nor followed."

Scarcely had he finished when they descried the masts of a large galley coming down on them from behind an elbow in the river. The skipper noticed their uneasiness. To throw him off the scent, Gourville said:

"Some friend of ours has laid a wager to catch up with us. We must bestir ourselves and win the bet."

The skipper had opened his mouth to answer that it was impossible, when Fouquet said, haughtily:

"If it be some one who wishes to come up with us let him do so."

"Still, we might try, monseigneur," replied the skipper, timidly. "Come, you fellows, bend to your oars!"

"No," ordered Fouquet; "on the contrary, stop at once."

"Monseigneur, what folly!" whispered Gourville, in his ear.

"Stop at once!" repeated Fouquet. The eight oars came to a stand. Their resistance to the water created a retrograde motion in the galley, and it stopped.

Gourville, who had his eyes constantly shaded by his hand, could now see what he was looking for. He suddenly dashed from the deck into the cabin where Fouquet was waiting for him.

"Colbert!" said he, in a voice trembling with emotion.

"Colbert?" repeated Fouquet. "That would be indeed strange; but no, it is impossible."

"I recognised him, I tell you, and he, too, recognised me, for he hurried at once into the chamber on the poop. Perhaps the King has sent him from Paris to bring us back."

"In that case he would come to us, instead of lying-to. What is he doing?"

"Spying on us, no doubt, monseigneur."

"I do not like uncertainty," said Fouquet. "Let us go to him."

"There is nothing to prove they are watching you, monseigneur; have patience."

"What should I do then?"

"Don't stop. Your reason for going so quick was prompted by anxiety to obey zealously the orders of the King. Go faster still. He who lives will see."

"You're right," cried Fouquet, "since they lie-to, let us move on. Remember the proverb: 'First come, first served.' Well, Colbert knows better than to pass me; a prudent man is Colbert."

He was right. The two galleys headed for Nantes, watching each other. When the superintendent landed, Gourville hoped he should be able to seek a place of refuge immediately and have relays of horses ready.

But just at that moment the second galley came alongside the first, and Colbert stepped out of it and saluted Fouquet with marks of the most profound respect, marks so signifi-

cant and so loudly expressed that they brought the whole population to the fosse.

Fouquet was entirely self-possessed. He felt that in these his last moments of greatness he owed a duty to himself. He wished to fall from so high an elevation that his fall should crush some of his enemies. Colbert was there; so much the worse for Colbert. The superintendent approached him with that arrogant winking of the eyes peculiar to him.

"What! you here, M. Colbert?" said he.

"To pay my respects to you, monseigneur," replied the intendant.

"You were in that galley?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"A boat with twelve rowers? What magnificence, M. Colbert! For a time I was sure the King or Queen mother was aboard."

"Monseigneur——"

And Colbert coloured.

"Your journey will be rather costly for those who have to pay for it, monsieur," said Fouquet. "But the main point is that you have arrived. Still," he added, after a pause, "you see that I who had only eight rowers have arrived before you."

And he turned his back on him, leaving him uncertain whether all the subterfuges of the second galley had escaped the notice of the first. At any rate Fouquet would not give his enemy the satisfaction of showing that he was afraid. He got into the carriage which the city had sent for him, no one knew why, and drove to the Maison de Nantes, escorted by a great crowd which had been excited for several days by the prospect of the convocation of the States. As soon as he was installed, Gourville set out to have horses stationed on the road to Vannes and Poitiers, and a boat ready at Paimbœuf. He managed these different operations with such mystery, generosity, and activity that Fouquet, who at the time had one of his fever attacks, would have been undoubtedly saved, but for the intervention of that arch disturber of human plans—Chance.

It was rumoured through the city during the night that the King was speeding to Nantes on post-horses, and that he would arrive in ten or twelve hours.

The populace, while waiting for the King, were agreeably impressed by the musketeers, who had come with M. d'Artagnan, their captain, and were quartered in the château as a guard of honour.

M. d'Artagnan, who was very polite, called on the superintendent at ten o'clock to pay him his respects.

Fouquet was in bed, like a man who clings to life and economises as far as possible the slender thread of existence, the irreparable tenuity of which is so quickly worn out by the shocks and angularities of the world.

When D'Artagnan appeared on the threshold, the superintendent saluted him with a friendly "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, monseigneur," replied the musketeer.

"And what orders have you received in my regard?" cried Fouquet.

"None, monseigneur; I have not heard even a word about you."

"M. d'Artagnan, my life and honour are both at stake, perhaps; you would not deceive me?"

"Eh? Why should I? Surely you are in no danger? I may remark that there is also an order relating to carriages and boats——"

"An order?"

"Yes. It cannot concern you, of course. A simple measure of police."

"What is it, captain? What is it?"

"To prevent all horses and boats from leaving Nantes except on a pass signed by the King."

"Good God! why——"

D'Artagnan laughed.

"The order will not be in force before the King's arrival; so you perceive, monseigneur, it has nothing to do with you. Do you know, M. Fouquet, that if, instead of addressing you, one of the first men in the realm, I were speaking to a man with an uneasy conscience, I should be forever compromised? What a splendid chance for any one who thought the best thing he could do would be to sheer off! No police, no guards, no orders, a free highway, and a free water-course; M. d'Artagnan obliged to lend his horses as soon as they are demanded! Certainly, all this ought to reassure you, M. Fouquet. The King would never have left me so independent if he had any evil intentions in your regards. So, M. Fouquet, you can ask me for anything you like. I am entirely at your service; but you will please render me a service in turn; you will give my compliments to Aramis and Porthos, in case you start for Belle-Isle, which you have a perfect right to do, and that, too, just as you are in your morning gown, without taking time to change your dress even."

With these words, and with a profound inclination, the musketeer, who had never taken his keen and friendly eyes off Fouquet's countenance, passed out of the room and disappeared.

He had not reached the steps of the vestibule, when the superintendent, in a state of great agitation, rang the bell violently, and shouted:

"My horses! my galley!"

There was no answer.

The superintendent dressed, taking any article he found to his hand.

"Gourvillle! Gourville!" he cried, slipping a watch into his pocket.

Gourville entered, pale, gasping for breath.

"Let us get away at once!" cried the superintendent as soon as he saw him.

"Too late! too late!" replied poor Fouquet's friend.

"Too late! why?"

"Listen!"

A flourish of trumpets and a roll of drums could be heard from the court in front of the château.

"We are lost!" murmured Fouquet. "D'Artagnan, my honest friend, you spoke too late!"

There was no doubt about it. The King was in the city; soon the cannon were thundering from the ramparts, and were being answered by a salute from the guns on a vessel in the river.

Fouquet knitted his temples, summoned his valets, and had himself dressed in ceremonial costume. Standing behind the curtains of his window, he remarked the enthusiasm of the crowds and the presence of a large troop, which had followed the prince, no one could tell why.

The King was escorted to the château with great pomp, and Fouquet saw him dismount under the portcullis and whisper to D'Artagnan, who was holding his stirrups.

When the King had entered, D'Artagnan directed his steps towards the residence of Fouquet, but so slowly, so very slowly, halting so often to speak to his musketeers, who were drawn up in line, that it looked as if he were counting the minutes or his footsteps before he gave his message. When he was in the court, Fouquet opened the window for the purpose of speaking to him.

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, when he perceived him; "you here still monseigneur!"

Fouquet simply heaved a sigh.

"Alas! yes, monsieur," he answered; "the King's arrival has interrupted all my plans."

"Ah! you know of the King's arrival?"

"I have seen it, monsieur, and now you have come by his order to——"

"To inquire after your health, monseigneur, and if it is not too bad, to beg you to have the kindness to come to the château."

"At once, M. d'Artagnan, at once."

"Upon my word," observed the captain, "now that the King is here, there is no more walking for anybody, no more freedom. The general regulations are in authority over every one at present, over you as well as me, over me as well as you."

Fouquet sighed for the last time, entered a carriage, for he was too weak to ride, and drove to the château, attended by D'Artagnan, whose politeness was as alarming now as it had before been consoling. While he was descending from his carriage, for the purpose of entering the château, a man in the garb of the common people approached him with great respect and handed him a letter.

D'Artagnan tried to prevent this man from holding any communication with Fouquet, and drove him away, but not before the superintendent had received the letter. Fouquet broke the seal and read it. A vague terror, the cause of which D'Artagnan easily comprehended, was depicted on the prime minister's face. Fouquet placed the letter in the portfolio he carried under his arm, and continued on his way to the King's apartments.

He had to wait a few moments on the terrace abutting on the little corridor leading to the royal cabinet.

D'Artagnan passed the superintendent, whom he had respectfully followed until now, and entered the King's apartment.

"Well?" inquired Louis XIV, who, as soon as he perceived him, threw a green cloth over some papers on the table.

"The order has been executed, Sire."

"And Fouquet?"

"M. le Surintendant has come with me, Sire," replied D'Artagnan.

"Let him be shown in in ten minutes," said Louis, dismissing D'Artagnan with a gesture.

The musketeer passed out, but he had hardly reached the spot where Fouquet was waiting for him when the King's bell recalled him.

"Did he not seem astonished?" asked Louis.

"Who, Sire?"

"Fouquet," repeated the King, without the "monsieur," an omission which confirmed D'Artagnan in his suspicions.

"No, Sire," he answered.

"Good."

And for the second time Louis dismissed D'Artagnan.

Fouquet had not quitted the terrace where his conductor had left him. He read his letter over again. These were the contents:

> "Some strange plot or other has been hatched against you. Perhaps they will not venture on anything at the château. They will when you return home. Your lodgings are surrounded by musketeers. Do not enter. A white horse is waiting for you behind the Esplanade."

M. Fouquet had recognised the handwriting of the devoted Gourville. And, not wishing, if any misfortune befell him, that this paper should compromise a faithful friend, he tore it into a number of little bits, which were soon carried by the wind across the railing of the terrace.

D'Artagnan surprised him watching the last scraps fluttering through space.

"Monsieur," said he, "the King expects you."

Fouquet raised his head, and with a determination to face everything, entered the cabinet, where a little bell, with which we are already acquainted, announced him to his Majesty.

The King nodded, but did not rise. He said, however, with some interest:

"Ah, how are you, M. Fouquet?"

"I am in a high fever at present, but always at the service of the King," replied the superintendent. "Did your Majesty send for me because you have some task to assign me?"

"No, monsieur, but to give you a piece of advice."

"I await it respectfully, Sire."

"Take a rest, M. Fouquet; do not waste your strength. The session of the States will be short, and when my secretaries have closed it, I do not care to have business talked of for the next fortnight afterward."

"The King has nothing to say to me on the subject of this assembly of the States?"

"No, M. Fouquet."

"Nothing to me, the superintendent of the finances?"

"Take a rest, I entreat you; that is all I have to say to you."

"Thank you, Sire," answered Fouquet, inclining.

Then, taking a decisive step:

"Shall I not have the pleasure," said he, "of conducting your Majesty to my house at Belle-Isle?"

He looked Louis full in the face, to judge of the effect of his proposal.

Louis reddened.

"Are you aware," answered the King, making an effort to smile, "that you have just said: 'My house at Belle-Isle'?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And do you not remember," continued Louis, in the same playful tone, "that you have given me Belle-Isle?"

"Yes, Sire. But you have not yet taken possession of it."

"I am resolved to do so."

"Yes, it was your Majesty's resolution as well as mine that you should do so, and I cannot express to your Majesty my pride and pleasure in seeing that your Majesty's entire military household has accompanied you for the purpose of assisting you to take possession of Belle-Isle."

The King stammered that he had not brought his musketeers with him for this purpose alone.

"Sire," said Fouquet, "I am trembling with fever and cold. If I remain a moment longer, I am likely to faint. Will your Majesty permit me to withdraw and hide myself under the bedclothes?"

"Yes, I perceive you are shivering. It is a painful sight. Go, M. Fouquet, go. I will send to inquire after you."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me. I expect to be much better in an hour."

"I wish to have someone accompany you to your lodgings," said the King.

"Just as you please, Sire. I should be very glad to take some person's arm.

"M. d'Artagnan!" cried the King, touching the bell.

"Oh! Sire," interrupted Fouquet, with a laugh that chilled the heart of the prince, "are you giving me a captain of musketeers as an escort? It is a very equivocal honour, Sire! If I must return to my lodgings, escorted by the chief of your musketeers, every one will say that you have had me arrested."

"Arrested?" repeated the King, paler than Fouquet himself, "arrested? ah!"

"Eh! why should not every one say so, Sire?" continued Fouquet, still laughing; "and I would lay a wager there would be found people malicious enough to laugh at it!"

This sally disconcerted the monarch. Fouquet had been clever enough or lucky enough to make Louis XIV recoil before the mere counterfeit presentment of the deed he was meditating. When D'Artagnan made his appearance he was ordered to select one of his musketeers to accompany M. Fouquet.

"It is not necessary," said the superintendent. "I prefer Gourville, who is waiting for me below. But this will not hinder me from enjoying the companionship of M. d'Artagnan. I am very glad he is going to see Belle-Isle, as he is so thoroughly acquainted with fortifications."

D'Artagnan, who could make nothing of the scene, bowed. Fouquet also saluted and withdrew, affecting all the slowness of a man who finds walking painful.

Once outside the château:

"Saved!" he cried. "Ah! yes, faithless king, thou shalt see Belle-Isle, but only when I am no longer there!"

And he disappeared.

D'Artagnan had remained with the King.

"Captain," said Louis, "you will follow M. Fouquet, keeping a hundred paces behind him."

"Yes, Sire."

"He is returning home. You will go there."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will arrest him in my name, and shut him up in a carriage."

D'Artagnan bowed.

"Then all I have to ask your Majesty is to name the place to which I am to conduct M. Fouquet."

"First to the château of Angers."

"Very well. Only reflect once more. Do you seriously give me the order to arrest M. Fouquet, Sire?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes!"

"Then write it, Sire."

"Here is the order."

D'Artagnan read it, saluted the King, and passed out. Looking from the terrace, he perceived the great verdant plains stretched as far as the Loire, and seemed to be running towards the purple horizon, which was cut by the azure of the waters and the dark green of the marshes. He was about to descend from the terrace, take his trellised carriage, and drive to Fouquet's lodgings. But just at the moment when he had his foot on the first step of the staircase, his attention was drawn to a moving point that was passing with great swiftness over this highway.

"What can it be?" he wondered. "A galloping horse, a runaway horse, very likely; how it does scamper along!"

"Ah! a white horse," continued the captain, who had just perceived the colour standing out brightly against a dark background. "Some boy whose horse is thirsty taking a short cut to the watering-place."

These reflections, rapid as lightning, simultaneous with visual perception, had already passed away from D'Artagnan's mind when he began descending the staircase a second time.

Some scraps of paper were lying on the steps, and came out distinctly on the black stones.

"Eh!" muttered the captain, "fragments of the letter torn

by M. Fouquet! Poor fellow! he gave his secret to the winds; the winds would have nothing to do with it, and brought it to the King. Decidedly, my poor Fouquet, you are too unlucky! the game is not fair; fortune is against you."

D'Artagnan, without stopping, picked up one of the pieces. "Gourville's little hand!" he exclaimed, inspecting it; "I was not mistaken."

And he read the word "horse."

"Aha!" he cried.

He examined another; there was no writing on it.

On a third he read the word "white."

"White horse," he repeated, after the manner of a child spelling.

"Zounds!" murmured the man of the suspicious mind; "a white horse!"

And like that grain of powder which, being set on fire, catches every other grain in the magazine, this idea of D'Artagnan pounced upon all his other ideas and suspicions. He turned round and went swiftly back to the terrace. The white horse was galloping in the direction of the Loire, at the extremity of which, blending with the vapours of the waters, a little sail appeared, dancing about like an atom.

"Oho!" cried the musketeer, "there is only one man who would gallop so fast over ploughed lands. Only a Fouquet, a financier, would gallop in this fashion in full daylight, and on a white horse. Only the lord of Belle-Isle would escape to the seacoast when there are so many thick forests on land; and there is only one D'Artagnan in the world to catch M. Fouquet, who has a start of half an hour, and who, if not prevented, will be in his boat in another hour."

Whereupon the musketeer ordered the trellised carriage to be taken at once outside the city and hidden in a little grove near the walls. He selected the best steed, jumped on his back, and galloped through the Rue aux Herbes, taking, not the road by which Fouquet had gone, but the bank of the Loire itself, certain that he should thus make a gain of ten minutes, and at the intersection of the two lines, come up with the fugitive, who would never suspect that he was being pursued from that direction.

What with the fleetness of the pursuit and the impatience of the pursuer, who grew as excited as if he were engaged in war or the chase, our D'Artagnan, lately so kind and gentle towards Fouquet, had become ferocious and almost sanguinary.

A hoarse sigh broke from his lips. Devoured by the fear of ridicule, he repeated again and again:

"I! I! to be duped by a Gourville! I—it will be said

I am growing old; it will be said I got a million for letting Fouquet escape!"

And he plunged the rowels still deeper into the horse's flanks. He had galloped nearly a league in two minutes. Suddenly, at the end of an open pasture-field, behind a hedge, he perceived a white form which appeared for a moment, then disappeared, and at last remained distinctly visible upon a rising ground.

D'Artagnan dropped his hand, and his black charger broke into a gallop. Both followed the same direction; the echoes of the hoof-beats of their coursers were confounded in one and the same sound, and Fouquet had not yet perceived D'Artagnan.

But when D'Artagnan passed beyond the cliff, a single echo struck the ear; it was that of the musketeer's steed rolling along like thunder. Fouquet turned; a hundred yards behind him, he perceived his enemy bending over his horse's neck. Doubt was impossible; the gleaming baldrick and red tunic proclaimed the musketeer. Fouquet slackened the reins and put twenty yards more between himself and his pursuer.

D'Artagnan grew uneasy.

"I must come up with him, though I kill my horse," thought the musketeer, and he began to saw the poor beast's mouth, while at the same time burying the pitiless spurs in his flanks.

The maddened horse gained fifty yards, and came within pistol-shot of Fouquet.

D'Artagnan was losing his senses; the boiling blood surged to his eyes and temples.

"Stop, in the King's name!" he shouted; "stop, or I'll bring you down with my pistol."

"Do so," Fouquet answered back, never relaxing his speed.

D'Artagnan seized a pistol and cocked it, hoping that the noise of the spring would bring him to a stand.

"You have pistols also," said he; "defend yourself."

Fouquet had, in fact, heard the noise; he turned round, and looking D'Artagnan full in the face, opened his tunic and bared his breast; but he did not touch the holsters.

"Kill me!" said Fouquet, "it will be more humane."

D'Artagnan, driven to extremity, seized his second pistol and aimed at the white horse.

"At your horse, not at you," he shouted.

And he fired. The animal, hit on the hind quarter, made a furious bound, and reared.

D'Artagnan's horse fell dead.

"I am dishonoured," muttered the musketeer. "I am a

wretch. For mercy's sake, M. Fouquet, throw me one of your pistols and let me blow my brains out!"

Fouquet continued his course without answering.

D'Artagnan started on his feet after his enemy. One after another, he flung away his hat, his tunic—they embarrassed him—the scabbard of his sword—it had got between his legs. Then his sword became too heavy; he flung that away, too. The white horse began to rattle in its throat and D'Artagnan was gaining. From a trot the exhausted animal passed to a staggering walk; his head was quivering; the foam from his mouth was tinged with blood.

With a desperate effort D'Artagnan leaped at Fouquet, seized his leg, and gasped out:

"I arrest you in the King's name. Blow my brains out; in any case, we have both done our duty."

Fouquet flung into the river the two pistols which D'Artagnan might have seized, and, jumping to the ground:

"I am your prisoner, monsieur," said he. "Take my arm, you are ready to faint."

"Thank you," murmured D'Artagnan, who, in fact, felt as if the ground were giving way under him and the sky rushing down on his head.

He rolled upon the sand, breathless, paralyzed.

Fouquet descended the slope, filled his hat with water, bathed the musketeer's temples, and forced a few drops of water between his lips. D'Artagnan rose and looked around him with a stupefied gaze. He saw Fouquet kneeling, his wet hat in his hand, smiling on him with ineffable gentleness.

"And you have not fled!" he cried. "Oh, monsieur, as far as heart, soul, and loyalty go, the real King is not Louis of the Louvre, or Philippe of Sainte-Marguerite, but you, the outlawed, the condemned!"

"I whom a single fault has ruined to-day, M. d'Artagnan."

"In God's name, what fault?"

"That of not having made you my friend. But how are we to get back to Nantes? We are very far away from it."

"You are right," answered D'Artagnan, dejectedly.

"The white horse may come to, perhaps; he was such a splendid animal! Mount him, M. d'Artagnan. I will walk until you are somewhat better."

"Poor beast! and wounded, too!" sighed the musketeer.

"Oh, he will manage it, I know him. But we can do better than that, we can both mount him."

"Well, let us try it," replied the captain.

But as soon as they were on its back he staggered, recovered. walked for a few minutes, staggered again, and fell

down beside the black horse, just as he came up with him.

"We must go on foot, it is fate's decree. Fortunately the road is excellent," said Fouquet, giving D'Artagnan his arm.

"*Mordioux!*" cried the musketeer, with haggard eyes, drawn features, and a heart swollen almost to bursting, "what a shameful day!"

Slowly they made their way to the spot where the carriage and escort were waiting for them behind the wood, twelve miles distant.

Fouquet mused a moment; then, looking the captain full in the face:

"Just a word. Will you bear it in mind?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And will you convey it to the person I wish?"

"I will."

"Saint-Mandé!" whispered Fouquet.

"Good. For whom?"

"For Madame de Bellière or Pélisson."

"It shall be done."

The carriage passed through Nantes, and took the route to Angers.

CHAPTER XXX

It was two o'clock in the afternoon. The King went frequently from his cabinet to the terrace, and sometimes opened the door of the corridor to see what his secretaries were doing.

"Strange!" muttered the King. "Call M. Colbert."

Colbert entered. He had been waiting ever since morning for this.

"M. Colbert," said Louis, sharply. "I must really know what has become of M. d'Artagnan."

Colbert answered with his usual composure:

"Where would your Majesty have me search for him?"

Almost before Colbert had finished speaking, a voice rougher than the King's interrupted the conversation between the monarch and the clerk.

"D'Artagnan!" cried the King, joyfully.

D'Artagnan, pale and furiously angry, said to the King:

"Sire, was it your Majesty that gave certain orders to my musketeers?"

"What orders?" asked the King.

"Relating to M. Fouquet's house."

"I have given none," returned the King.

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, biting his moustache; "I was not mistaken; it was this gentleman."

And he pointed to Colbert.

"What orders are you speaking about?" said the King.

"Orders to turn an entire house upside down, to beat M. Fouquet's officials and servants, force drawers, and sack a peaceful dwelling. *Mordioux!* an order fit for a savage to give!"

"D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" murmured the King.

"I have acted in the King's interest," stammered Colbert; "it is hard to be treated in this manner by one of your Majesty's officers, and that too, when the respect I owe my sovereign prevents me from retaliating."

"The respect you owe your sovereign!" cried D'Artagnan, whose eyes flamed; "the respect you owe your sovereign consists in making his authority respected and his person beloved. Every agent of unlimited power is the representative of that power, and when the people curse the hand that smites them, it is the hand of royalty that has to bear the brunt of their reproaches. Must a soldier, hardened by forty years of wounds and bloodshed, teach you this lesson, monsieur? Must mercy be on my side and ferocity on yours? You have had innocent men arrested, bound, imprisoned!"

"M. Fouquet's accomplices, perhaps," said Colbert.

"Who has told you that M. Fouquet has accomplices, or even that he is guilty? The King alone knows it, and his justice is not blind. When he says: 'Arrest, imprison such and such people,' he is obeyed. Talk not to me, then, of the respect you have for the King, and be careful of your words, lest, perchance, they may conceal a threat, for the King will not permit those who serve him well to be threatened by those who serve him ill, and in case—which God forbid!—I had a master so ungrateful, I would still know how to make myself respected."

Colbert, humiliated and enraged, bent his head to the King, as if asking permission to withdraw.

D'Artagnan, then, like Colbert, bowed; but the King, who was anxious to hear, above all, an exact and detailed account of the arrest of his superintendent of finances—that man who had for a moment made him tremble—saw that the musketeer's ill-humour was likely to put off for at least a quarter of an hour the story he was burning to hear; he therefore dismissed Colbert, who had nothing new to tell him, from his mind, and addressed his captain.

"Well, monsieur," said he, "give an account of your mission; you can rest afterwards."

D'Artagnan, whose foot was on the threshold, halted at these words, retraced his steps, and Colbert was constrained to retire. The intendant's face took on a purple tinge; his dark, malignant eyes shone with a sombre fire under the bushy eyebrows; he bowed to the King, half drew himself up as he passed D'Artagnan, and retired with death in his heart.

Now that D'Artagnan was alone with the King, he sobered down immediately, and, composing his countenance, said:

"Sire, you are a young King. It is by the dawn that men judge whether the day is to be fine or overcast. What auguries, Sire, are the people, placed by God under your law, likely to draw from the beginning of your reign, if the intermediaries between them and you are ministers of anger and violence? But, to come back to myself, Sire, and abandon a discussion you may think idle and perhaps unbecoming, I have arrested M. Fouquet."

"You took your time about it," said the King, sourly.

D'Artagnan looked at the King.

"I should have told your Majesty that M. Fouquet arrested me; it would have been far more accurate. I rectify my statement, therefore: I have been arrested by M. Fouquet."

It was Louis XIV's turn to be surprised, and surprised his Majesty was. D'Artagnan, with his extraordinary keenness of vision, appreciated what was passing in the mind of his master. He did not give him time to put questions. He related, with that poetry and picturesqueness which, perhaps, he alone possessed at that period, the escape of Fouquet, the pursuit, the furious race, and, lastly, the inimitable generosity of the superintendent, who could have got away half a score of times, and could have slain his pursuer twenty times over, but who had preferred a prison—and worse still, perhaps—to the humiliation of the man bent on robbing him of his liberty.

"Where is M. Fouquet now?" asked Louis, after a moment's silence.

"M. Fouquet," replied D'Artagnan, "is in the iron cage prepared for him by M. Colbert, and is now going on the road to Angers as fast as four stout horses can carry him."

"Why did you leave him on the way?"

"Because your Majesty did not order me to go to Angers. The best proof of that is the fact that your Majesty was looking for me a while ago—and I had another reason, besides."

"What is it?"

"If I had gone, poor M. Fouquet would never have attempted to escape."

"What do you mean?" cried the King, completely bewildered.

"Your Majesty must understand, surely you understand, Sire—that my warmest wish is to hear that M. Fouquet is at liberty. I have assigned him the most stupid corporal I could find among my musketeers, in order to give him a chance of escaping."

"I am astonished," said the King, darkly, "that you did not immediately follow the fortunes of him whom M. Fouquet wished to seat on my throne. You could then have all you wanted: affection and gratitude. In my service, monsieur, you can only find a master."

"If M. Fouquet had not gone for you to the Bastille, Sire, there was another man who would," replied D'Artagnan, with marked emphasis; "and you are well aware, Sire, that that man would have been myself."

The King paused. These words, words at once so frank and true, of his captain of musketeers, could not be gainsaid. He advanced to the door, and called Colbert.

Colbert had not left the corridor, where the secretaries were working. Colbert appeared.

"Colbert, you have ordered M. Fouquet's house to be searched?"

"Yes, Sire."

"With what result?"

"M. de Roncherat, sent thither with your Majesty's musketeers, has placed certain papers in my hands."

"I will look them over. Give me your hand."

"My hand, Sire?"

"Yes, to place it in that of M. d'Artagnan. In fact, M. d'Artagnan," he added, turning with a smile to the soldier, who, on seeing the clerk, had resumed his haughty attitude, "you have really no acquaintance with the man before you. Make his acquaintance."

And he pointed to Colbert.

"He may be but an indifferent servant in a subaltern position, but he will be a great man when I raise him to the first rank."

"Sire!" stammered Colbert, made giddy by fear as well as by pleasure.

"I understand now," murmured D'Artagnan in the King's ear, "he was jealous."

"Exactly, and jealousy tied his wings."

"He will be a winged serpent henceforth," growled the musketeer, not yet reconciled to his late adversary.

But when Colbert approached, his physiognomy presented an aspect so different from that which it usually wore, he looked so kind and gentle and affable, his eyes shone with such noble intelligence, that D'Artagnan was shaken, almost changed, in his convictions.

Colbert pressed his hand.

"What the King has just said to you, monsieur, is a proof of his Majesty's profound knowledge of men. My unrelenting opposition to abuses before to-day is a proof of my ambition to lay the foundation of a great reign for my King and great prosperity for my country. I have many ideas, M. d'Artagnan; you will see them bear fruit in the sun of public peace; and, though I may not have the assurance nor the happiness that I shall win the friendship of honest men, I am at least certain that I shall win their esteem. To win their admiration, monsieur, I would give my life."

Such a change, such sudden distinction of bearing, and the silent approbation of the King as well, gave the musketeer food for thought. He bowed very courteously to Colbert, who never took his eyes off him.

Seeing them reconciled, the King said to D'Artagnan:

"Monsieur, you will at once go and take possession of the island and fief of Belle-Isle-en-Mer."

"Yes, Sire; unaided?"

"Take all the troops you need, to avoid a check in case the fortress hold out."

Colbert approached D'Artagnan.

"If you accomplish your mission successfully," said he, "it will be the first step to a marshal's baton."

"Why do you say: 'If you accomplish your mission successfully'?"

"Because you will find it difficult."

"In what respect?"

"You have friends in Belle-Isle, M. d'Artagnan, and it is not an easy thing for men like you to stride to greatness over the dead body of a friend."

D'Artagnan bent his head, while Colbert returned to the King's side.

A quarter of an hour later, D'Artagnan received a written order to blow up the fortifications of Belle-Isle, in case of resistance, with the power of life and death over all the inhabitants and *refugees*, and an injunction not to allow a single one to escape.

"Colbert was right," thought D'Artagnan, "my marshal's

baton would cost the life of my two friends. But people forget that my friends are not more stupid than the birds, and will not wait until the fowler's hand is laid upon them before spreading their wings. I will show them that hand so plainly that they will have plenty of time to see it. Poor Porthos! poor Aramis! No, my advancement shall not cost your wings a single feather!"

After coming to this conclusion, D'Artagnan assembled the royal army, embarked with it at Paimbœuf, and set sail without losing a moment.

CHAPTER XXXI

At the end of the mole, which the furious sea dashes against at evening tide, two men, arm in arm, were conversing in an animated and unreserved tone. They are our two outlaws, Aramis and Porthos, who had taken refuge in Belle-Isle, after the ruin of their hopes, after the failure of M. d'Herblay's mighty scheme.

"You may say what you like, my dear Aramis," repeated Porthos, as he vigorously inhaled the salt air with which he was in the habit of inflaming his powerful chest; "you may say what you like, Aramis, the disappearance of all the fishing boats that left us during the last two days is not natural. There has been no storm at sea. The weather has been constantly calm, not the slightest disturbance. Moreover, if there had been a storm, all our boats could not have been sunk. It is all very strange; the disappearance of these boats fills me with amazement, I can tell you."

"True," murmured Aramis, "you are right, my dear Porthos. There is really something strange in all this."

"But have you remarked also that the only two boats that were left in the island, and which I sent in search of the others——"

Aramis interrupted his companion by a cry and by such an abrupt movement that Porthos came to a standstill as if astounded.

"Unhappy man! What have you done? Then we are lost!" exclaimed the bishop.

"Lost! What do you mean?" asked Porthos, quite scared. "Lost how, Aramis? Why is it we are lost?"

Aramis strode along, giving signs of the most convulsive emotion.

Porthos, who was getting tired of keeping in the track of

his friend's feverish movements; Porthos, who because of his serenity and good faith was incapable of comprehending a sort of agitation that was manifested by frequent jerks and starts; Porthos stopped him.

"Let us sit down on this rock," said he, "there, beside me. And now, Aramis, I conjure you for the last time, explain so that I can understand, explain to me what we are doing here."

"Porthos——" said Aramis, taken aback.

"I know that the false King has been trying to dethrone the true King. That is plain, I can understand that easily enough."

"Yes," asserted Aramis.

"I know that we, being captains and engineers, have thrown ourselves into Belle-Isle, taken the direction of the works and the command of the ten companies levied, paid, and controlled by M. Fouquet, or rather by his son-in-law. That also I understand."

Aramis rose impatiently. He looked like a lion troubled by a gnat.

Porthos held him back by the arm.

"But what I do not understand, what, in spite of all my efforts and all my reflections, I cannot understand, and what I shall never be able to understand, is that, instead of sending us troops and reinforcements of men, munitions, and provisions, we are left without boats, left without help, left without any one coming near us; that, so far from having any correspondence with outsiders, either by signals, or written or verbal communications, we are cut off from relations with every one. Come, now, Aramis, answer me."

"Porthos, what is that over yonder?" interrupted Aramis, suddenly rising and pointing to a black spot on the purple line of the ocean.

"A boat!" cried Porthos, "yes, a boat, beyond any doubt. Ah! we're going to have news at last!"

"Two!" exclaimed the bishop, discovering another spar, "two! three! four!"

"Five!" said Porthos, in his turn. "Great heavens! it is a fleet! Thank God! thank God!"

"Our boats returning, probably," rejoined Aramis, very uneasy, notwithstanding the confidence he affected.

An old fisherman passed them.

"Are these our boats?" inquired Aramis.

The old man gazed intently at the horizon.

"No, monseigneur," he answered; "they are transports belonging to the royal service."

"Hurrah!" shouted Porthos; "they are bringing us reinforcements."

Aramis leaned his head on his hand, and did not answer. Then, suddenly:

"Porthos," said he, "have the alarm sounded"

"The alarm! What are you thinking of?"

"Yes, and let the cannoniers mount to their batteries, the gunners to their guns; pay particular attention to the coast batteries.

Porthos stared at him, stared as if he were anxious to find out whether his friend had lost his senses.

"I will go and have these orders executed myself," continued Aramis, in his gentlest tones, "if you do not care to do so, my dear friend."

"But I will go this very instant," cried Porthos, starting to have these orders executed, occasionally looking back, however, to see if the Bishop of Vannes had not made a mistake, and if, on returning to more rational ideas, he would not recall him.

Aramis, however, with eyes still riveted on the horizon, saw that the ships were coming nearer and nearer. By climbing on the tops of the crags and cliffs, the soldiers and the islanders were enabled to distinguish the masts, then the lower sails, and, lastly, the hulls of the transports, all bearing the royal flag of France at the masthead.

At nightfall, one of these pinnaces that had created such a sensation among the inhabitants of Belle-Isle, anchored within cannon-shot of the fortifications. In spite of the darkness it was observed that there was some excitement on board this vessel, from which a boat was let down; it was manned by three rowers, who bent to their oars, rowed in the direction of the harbour, and touched land just under the fort.

The commander of this yawl jumped on the mole. He held a letter in his hand, waved it in the air, and apparently wanted to communicate with some one. He was quickly recognised by several of the soldiers as one of the pilots belonging to the island. Indeed, he was the skipper of one of the two boats which Porthos, on account of his anxiety as to the fate of the fishermen who had disappeared two days before, had sent in search of the missing craft. He asked to be conducted to M. d'Herblay. At a sign from a sergeant, two soldiers stood each on one side of him, and escorted him.

Aramis was on the quay. The envoy presented himself before the bishop. It was almost entirely dark, in spite of the torches borne by the soldiers who followed Aramis at a certain distance when he was making his rounds.

"Eh! is that you, Jonathas?" said he. "Where have you come from?"

"Well, monseigneur, we had hardly gone a league when we were captured by a *chasse-maré* belonging to the King."

"So a royal fleet is blockading the coast, then?" said Aramis.

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Who commands it?"

"The captain of the King's musketeers."

"D'Artagnan?"

"D'Artagnan!" cried Porthos.

"I think that is his name."

"And it was he who gave you the letter?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

Aramis read the following lines rapidly:

"*Order of the King to take Belle-Isle;*

"*Order to put the garrison to the sword, if it resist;*

"*Order to make all the men in the garrison prisoners;*

"*Signed,* D'ARTAGNAN, *who arrested, on the day before yesterday, M. Fouquet, to send him to the Bastille.*"

Aramis turned pale and crumpled the paper in his hand.

"What is it all about?" inquired Porthos.

"It is not a matter of any consequence, my friend—Jonathas!"

"Monseigneur?"

"You will return to the captain."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"And say that we request him to come himself to the island. You may go now, Jonathas."

"*Ma foi!* I no longer comprehend anything," murmured Porthos.

"I am about to make you comprehend everything, my dear friend, for the time for doing so has come. Sit down on this gun-carriage, open your ears, and listen attentively."

"I am all attention. *Pardieu!* don't have any doubts about that!"

"What I have to say, Porthos, my friend, will probably surprise you, but it will also open your eyes. I have deceived you, my excellent friend."

"Deceived me?"

"Ah! unfortunately, yes!"

"Did you do so for my good, Aramis?"

"I thought so, Porthos; I thought so sincerely, my friend."

"In that case," rejoined the honest Seigneur de Bracieux, "you have rendered me a service, for which I thank you. If

you had not deceived me I should, very likely, have deceived myself. But tell me in what respect you have deceived me?"

"I served the usurper, against whom Louis XIV is at this moment directing all his efforts."

"The usurper," said Porthos, scratching his forehead, "is—I don't well understand."

"Is one of the two Kings who are contending for the crown of France."

"Very well! So you served the one who is not Louis XIV?"

"You have hit the truth at the first guess."

"And the consequence is that——"

"We are rebels, my poor friend."

"*Diable! diable!*" cried Porthos, in a tone of disappointment.

"My poor Porthos! Forgive me, I beseech you!"

"So," Porthos went on, without paying any attention to the entreaty of the Bishop of Vannes, "so then, I have a grave quarrel with King Louis XIV?"

"I will arrange all that, my good friend, I will arrange it. I will take all the blame on my own shoulders. My crime, dear Porthos, is that I have been selfish."

"I like that word," answered Porthos; "and, since you have been acting solely for yourself, I cannot be angry with you. It was so natural in you to do so!"

And, after these sublime words, Porthos cordially squeezed his friend's hand.

Aramis, in presence of such greatness of soul, discovered how small he himself was. It was the second time he saw himself forced to bow before that superiority of heart which is far grander than splendour of intellect.

He responded to the generous caress of his friend by a silent and energetic pressure. "Dear Porthos," he said, "let us be men both in deliberation and execution—stay, some one is hailing us from the harbour; a boat must have arrived. Attention, Porthos! be on your guard!"

"It's D'Artagnan, I'm sure," replied Porthos in a voice of thunder, making for the parapet.

"Yes, it is I," answered the captain of the musketeers, springing lightly to one of the steps of the mole, mounting rapidly up to the esplanade where his two friends were waiting for him.

But as he was ascending, Porthos and Aramis descried an officer following D'Artagnan and treading in every one of his footsteps.

The captain stopped half-way in his course. His companion imitated him.

"Order your people to retire," cried the captain to Aramis and Porthos; "order them to retire beyond reach of our voices."

The order, which was given by Porthos, was executed immediately.

Thereupon D'Artagnan turned to the man following him.

"Monsieur," said the musketeer, "we are no longer on the King's fleet, where you addressed me so arrogantly lately."

"Monsieur," answered the officer, "I did not address you arrogantly; I obeyed, simply and rigorously, my orders. I have been ordered to follow you, and I do so. I have been ordered not to allow any communication between you and any one else without becoming cognisant of such communication, and so I am compelled to be present at it."

D'Artagnan trembled with rage. Porthos and Aramis, who heard the dialogue, trembled also, but it was with anxiety and fear. D'Artagnan, all the time chewing his moustache with that fierce energy which was the external sign of a fury that was sure to end in a terrible outburst, approached the officer.

"Monsieur," said he, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, but which gathered intensity from the fact that, while it affected a profound calmness, it was big with storms, "monsieur, you have had the misfortune, either you or those who sent you, to insult me. I cannot exact satisfaction from those who are behind you; they are either unknown to me or they are too far away. But you are within my reach, and I swear by God that if you take another step when I raise my foot to mount to where these gentlemen are standing—I swear by my name that I will cleave your head with one stroke of my sword, and hurl you into the water. Oh! I care very little about what comes of it. I have never been angry but six times in my life, monsieur, and every one of the five times before this I killed my man."

The officer did not move; he turned pale at the terrible threat, and answered with frank simplicity:

"Monsieur, you are doing wrong in preventing me from obeying my orders."

D'Artagnan raised his foot with appalling composure, and placed it on another step, then looked round to see if he were followed by the officer.

The officer made the sign of the cross and followed.

Porthos and Aramis, who knew their D'Artagnan, uttered a

cry, and hurried forward to arrest the blow, the echo of which they fancied they already heard.

But D'Artagnan passed his sword into his left hand.

"Monsieur," said he, in a voice that betrayed strong emotion, "you are a brave man. You will, therefore, understand better what I am about to say to you than what I said just now. The gentlemen we have come to see and against whom your orders are pointed, are my friends. Will you permit me to talk with them without witnesses?"

"M. d'Artagnan, if I yield to your request, if I do what you ask me to do, I am breaking my word; but to refuse to do so would be to displease you. I prefer the first alternative. Talk with your friends, and do not despise me, monsieur, for doing, out of my affection for you whom I esteem and honour, do not despise me for doing for your sake alone, and for no other motive, a discreditable act."

D'Artagnan was deeply moved; he passed his arm quickly round the young man's neck, and then went up to his friends.

The officer wrapped his cloak about him, and sat down on the steps, which were covered with damp seaweed.

"And now," said D'Artagnan to his friends, "this is the situation; judge for yourselves. Your boats have all been seized. If you had tried to escape, you must have fallen in with some of the cruisers that plow the sea in every direction and are all on the lookout for you. The King is determined to have you and will take you."

Aramis grew gloomy, and Porthos indignant.

"This was my idea," continued D'Artagnan: "To have you both come on board my vessel, to have you near me, and then to set you at liberty. But now how do I know but that after my return to my ship, I may not meet a superior there, may not find secret orders depriving me of my command and giving it to some one else, who will dispose of me and of you, and no possible security for any of us?"

"I must stay in Belle-Isle," said Aramis, resolutely, "and you may take my word that I shall not surrender if I can help it."

D'Artagnan went to the parapet, leaned over the steps of the mole, and called the officer, who mounted at once.

"Monsieur," said D'Artagnan, after interchanging with him the most cordial courtesies, such courtesies as are natural between gentlemen who know and appreciate each other, "monsieur," said he, "should I take these gentlemen with me, what would you do?"

"I would not offer any opposition, monsieur; but as I have direct and formal orders to guard them, I will do so."

"It is all over," said Aramis, in a hollow voice.

"Take Porthos with you," said the bishop. "He will be able to prove to the King, with my assistance and yours, M. d'Artagnan, that his connection with this affair hardly deserves notice."

"I require time for reflection," answered Porthos nobly.

"Then you will remain here?"

"Until further orders," cried Aramis excitedly.

"Until we get hold of an idea," rejoined D'Artagnan, "and that will not take long, for I have one already."

"Then let us say good-bye," exclaimed Aramis; "but, really, my dear Porthos, you ought to go with him."

"No!" answered the engineer, gruffly and shortly.

D'Artagnan, after embracing his two old friends, left Belle-Isle, attended by the inseparable companion that M. Colbert had assigned him.

He at once assembled his council. The council was composed of the officers serving under his orders. All told, they were eight; a chief of the maritime forces; a major who had charge of the artillery; an engineer; the officer whose acquaintance we have just made; and four lieutenants. Having assembled them in his cabin on the poop, D'Artagnan rose, doffed his hat, and began in the following terms:

"Gentlemen, I have reconnoitred Belle-Isle-en-Mer, and have found a strong and resolute garrison there. Furthermore, I have discovered that the preparations made for defending it can give us a good deal of trouble. I have, therefore, decided to send for the two principal officers of the garrison so that we may talk with them. They will see us, will see the forces of which we can dispose; they will, consequently, discover the fate that awaits them in case of rebellion. We shall tell them that when the first gun is fired, no mercy can be expected from the King. Then, at least I hope so, all resistance will cease. They will surrender without striking a blow, and we shall gain peaceable possession of a fortress which it might cost us a good deal to conquer."

The officers interchanged glances. They wanted to find out, from the expression of one another's eyes, what each was thinking; evidently they were inclined to adopt the opinion of D'Artagnan, who was delighted to perceive that they would consent to his sending a boat for Aramis and Porthos. But just at this very moment the King's officer drew a letter from his breast, and handed it to D'Artagnan. It bore on the cover the number 1.

"What, another?" muttered the captain, in surprise.

"Read, monsieur," said the officer, with a courtesy which was blended with sadness.

D'Artagnan, full of mistrust, unfolded the paper and read these lines:

> *"M. d'Artagnan is forbidden to assemble any council whatever, or to hold any deliberations, before Belle-Isle is surrendered, and the prisoners condemned to be shot.*
>
> *"Signed,* LOUIS."

D'Artagnan repressed the shiver of impatience that ran through his whole body.

"Very well, monsieur," he said, with a courteous smile; "the King's orders shall be obeyed."

The blow was direct, crushing, mortal. Although furious at being baulked by the idea of the King, D'Artagnan did not, however, despair, and concentrating his mind on the idea he had brought with him from Belle-Isle, he developed out of it another method of saving his friends.

"Gentlemen," said he, abruptly, "since the King has devolved upon another person than me the execution of his secret orders, I no longer enjoy his confidence, and I should be, in good truth, unworthy of a command I was rash enough to hold in the face of such insulting suspicions. I shall, therefore, depart at once and hand in my resignation to the King. I give that resignation now in your presence, at the same time enjoining you to fall back on the coast of France so that the forces which his Majesty confided to me may not be put in any peril. You will, therefore, return to your posts, and order your men to do the same. In about an hour it will be ebb-tide. To your posts, gentlemen. I do not suppose," said he, on seeing that every one obeyed except the officer charged to watch him, "that your orders contain any objection this time?"

D'Artagnan felt almost triumphant as he uttered these words. This plan would be the salvation of his friends. With the blockade raised, they could embark immediately and sail for Spain or England unmolested. While they were escaping, D'Artagnan would go to the King, would base his justification of his return on the indignation aroused in him by the suspicions which Colbert had excited to his prejudice. Then he would be sent back with full powers, and would capture Belle-Isle; that is to say, would seize the cage after the birds had flown. But this scheme was brought to nought by a second order which the officer handed to him. It read thus:

> *"Should M. d'Artagnan show any intention of resigning, he is no longer to be regarded as commander of the*

expedition, and all officers placed under him are bound to refuse to obey him. Furthermore, the said Sieur d'Artagnan, having lost his rank as head of the army sent against Belle-Isle, is ordered to start for France immediately, in company with the officer who hands him this message, and who is to consider the said Sieur d'Artagnan as his prisoner, for whom he is responsible."

Brave and nonchalant as was D'Artagnan's disposition, he turned pale. Everything had been calculated with a reach of thought that, for the first time in thirty years, recalled the profound clear-sightedness and the inflexible logic of the great cardinal. He leaned his head on his hand, weighing everything and hardly breathing.

"Monsieur," said the officer, coming up to him, "I await your good pleasure; are you ready to start?"

"I am," replied the captain, grinding his teeth.

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to come along with me?"

"Yes, immediately," articulated D'Artagnan, feebly, vanquished, utterly crushed by implacable necessity.

And he made his way languidly into the skiff, which, with both wind and tide in its favour, steered for the coast of France. The King's guards had embarked with him.

However, the musketeer was in hopes that he should reach Nantes early enough to plead with the King for his friends, and that he might have eloquence enough to do so successfully.

The bark flew along the waters like a swallow. At length D'Artagnan saw the land of France standing out distinctly in its blackness against the white clouds of the night.

"Ah! monsieur," he whispered to the officer, to whom he had not spoken for the last hour, "what would I not give to learn the nature of the instructions given to the new commander! They were peaceful, I hope? and——"

He did not finish. The echo of a distant cannot-shot rumbled along the surface of the waves, then another, then two or three with louder reverberations.

"They have opened fire on Belle-Isle," answered the officer.

The skiff had just touched French soil.

CHAPTER XXXII

After D'Artagnan had left Aramis and Porthos, the two friends returned to the principal fort, in order to be able to converse with more freedom.

Porthos, who was still downcast, was a source of worry to Aramis, who had never felt his own intellect clearer.

Aramis pressed his hand.

"We have many years before us," said he, "many years to preserve for the world a few examples of rare men. Trust me, dear friend. There is no answer from D'Artagnan, it is a good sign. He must have given orders for drawing his ships together and freeing these waters from them. I have also given orders to have a boat brought on rollers down to the outlet of the great underground passage at Locmaria, the place, you know, where we so often have lain in wait for foxes. We'll wait for a favourable moment during the night, and then—to sea."

"A capital idea; but what is the use of it?"

"The use of it is that no one knows of this grotto, or rather, this outlet, except two or three hunters living on the island; and that, if the island is occupied, the scouts, not perceiving any craft around the coast, will never suspect that any one can escape, and will stop watching."

"I understand."

Suddenly a cry was heard:

"To arms!"

The cry, repeated by hundreds of voices, was borne into the chamber where the two friends were sitting, bringing surprise to one of them, anxiety to the other.

Aramis opened the window. He saw a great crowd with torches. Women were flying, and armed men were rushing to their posts.

Sloops, laden with soldiers, were seen approaching. They were taking three different directions, evidently intending to land at three different points at the same time.

"What ought to be done?" asked an officer on guard.

"Stop them; if they continue to come on, fire!" answered Aramis.

Five minutes later the cannonade began.

These were the shots heard by D'Artagnan when he touched the soil of France.

But the sloops were too close to the mole for the cannon to hit them. The soldiers landed, and then a fierce hand to hand conflict ensued. Porthos and Aramis charged with much vigour, and inspired their men with such valour, that the royalists re-embarked in confusion, taking nothing with them except their wounded.

"But, Porthos, we must have a prisoner," cried Aramis, "quick!"

Porthos, bending over the steps of the mole, seized by the nape of the neck one of the officers of the royal army, just as

he was waiting to follow his men into a gunboat. The giant's arm raised aloft this prey, which served him as a buckler, for not a single-shot was fired at him.

"Here is your prisoner," said Porthos to Aramis.

"Good!" cried the latter, laughing. "We have a prisoner, and he must tell us what our enemies are preparing for us."

"Yes, we must question the prisoner," said Porthos, "and we can easily make him speak. We are going to supper, let us invite him; he'll talk when he drinks."

Which was done. The officer, whose name was Biscarrat, a little uneasy at first, felt reassured when he saw the persons with whom he had to deal. Not being afraid of compromising himself, he entered into the full particulars of D'Artagnan's resignation and departure. He explained how, after this departure, the new leader of the expedition had ordered a sudden attack on Belle-Isle. But there his explanations rested.

The look exchanged by Aramis and Porthos was sufficient testimony to their despair. It was useless thinking of banking on the ingenious imagination of D'Artagnan now; consequently there was no resource in case of defeat.

Aramis, continuing his interrogatories, asked what was likely to happen to the leaders of Belle-Isle.

"The orders are," replied the prisoner, "to give them no quarter in battle and to hang them if they survive."

Porthos bowed. "Allow me to drain this bumper to your health," said he, drinking.

"Oh, you are not reserved to such a dreadful fate, my friends," replied the young man, warmly. "If you are found you will be killed; that is already settled. Try, then, not to be found!"

From the distance, far away among the rocks, came a dull, rumbling sound, the noise of battle, and of a battle that was soon over.

"What is that?" inquired Porthos.

"Ah! *pardieu!*" cried Aramis, "it is as I suspected."

"What did you suspect?" asked the officer.

"The attack you made was only a feint, was it not, monsieur? And while you allowed your companies to be repulsed, you were making an attack on another point in the island."

"Oh, on several other points, monsieur."

"Then we are ruined," said the Bishop of Vannes, calmly.

"Ruined! that is possible," observed the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, "but we are neither taken nor hanged."

And with these words he rose from table, approached the wall, and coolly took down his sword and pistols, which he inspected with all the care of the veteran who is ever ready

for battle and feels that his life, in a great measure, depends on the excellence and good condition of his weapons.

At the roar of the cannon and the tidings of a surprise which might deliver the island into the hands of the royal troops, the crowd hurried in dismay into the fort. It came to demand help and advice from its leaders.

Aramis, pale and downcast, stood between two torches at the window, which opened on the great court, now thronged with soldiers awaiting his orders, and with terrified islanders imploring his aid.

"My friends," said M. d'Herblay, in a grave and sonorous voice, "M. Fouquet, your protector, your friend, your father, has been arrested by the King's order and thrown into the Bastille."

A prolonged and menacing cry of rage mounted up to the window at which the bishop was stationed, and enfolded him like some vibrating fluid.

"Let us avenge M. Fouquet!" cried those of the crowd who were most excited. "Death to the royalists!"

"No, my friends," replied Aramis, solemnly, "no, no resistance. The King is the master of his kingdom. The King is the mandatory of God. God and the King have stricken M. Fouquet. Humble yourselves before the hand of God. The King commands you to lay down your arms; obey him and retire peacefully to your dwellings. I ask, I beseech, and, if need be, I command you to do so, in M. Fouquet's name."

The crowd, packed beneath the window, gave vent to a long groan of anger and fright.

"The soldiers of King Louis XIV have entered Belle-Isle," continued Aramis. "A struggle between them and you would no longer be a battle, it would be a massacre. Go, go, and forget; this time I command you in the name of the Lord!"

The mutineers withdrew, slowly indeed, but silently and submissively.

"Why, what is this you have done, my friend?" asked Porthos.

"Monsieur," said Biscarrat, "you are saving all these people, but you are not saving yourself and your friend."

"M. de Biscarrat," answered the prelate, in a tone of singular elevation and courtesy, "be good enough to resume possession of your liberty."

"But, gentlemen, in the meantime, what is going to become of you, whom I feel it an honour to be able to call my friends, since you have in your great kindness permitted me to do so?" returned the officer, deeply affected on bidding adieu to th two men.

"We'll remain here."

"But, *mon Dieu!* the order is formal!"

"I am the Bishop of Vannes, M. Biscarrat, and in these days it is as unusual to shoot bishops as to hang gentlemen."

"Yes, monsieur yes, monseigneur," returned Biscarrat, "you have that chance left to you still. Well, I must take my leave; I will repair to the commander of the expedition, the King's lieutenant. Adieu, gentlemen, or rather, *au revoir!*"

Whereupon the good officer jumped on a horse given him by Aramis, and galloped in the direction of the firing which they had just heard, and which by bringing such a crowd of people into the fort had interrupted the conversation of the two friends with their prisoner.

Aramis looked after him for a time, and now that he was alone with Porthos:

"Well, do you understand?" said he.

"*Ma foi!* no!"

"Did you not feel that the presence of Biscarrat was an annoyance?"

"No; he is quite a nice young fellow."

"Yes, but what about the grotto of Locmaria? Do you think it would be wise for us to let everybody know about it? Forward, friend Porthos! Our boat is waiting for us, and the King has not caught us yet."

The cavern of Locmaria was so far away from the mole that to reach it the two friends were obliged to husband their strength. Moreover, it was growing very dark; the clock in the fort was striking twelve. Porthos and Aramis were loaded with arms and money. They walked across the moor between the mole and the cave, listening to every sound, on their guard against every ambush.

At length, after a rapid march, frequently interrupted, however, by prudent halts, they reached the deep grottoes into which the provident care of the Bishop of Vannes had caused a boat to be rolled on cylinders—an excellent boat, too, quite capable of keeping the sea in such fine weather.

Aramis left Porthos sitting at the entrance to the grotto, and, bending his head, penetrated into the interior, imitating the hoot of an owl as he did so.

A little plaintive cooing, a sound almost indistinct, answered back from the depths of the cave.

"Are you there, Yves?" inquired the bishop.

"Yes, monseigneur. Goennec is here also, as well as his son."

"Good. Is everything ready?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Go to the entrance of the grotto, my good Yves, with your two friends; there you will find the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, who is resting, as our long journey has fatigued him. If he is unable to walk, take him up and bring him here."

The three Bretons obeyed. But the bishop's injunction to his three servants was not needed. Porthos had soon felt as strong as ever, and was now, in fact making the descent. His heavy footsteps were already resounding through the cavities formed and supported by the pillars of silex and granite.

As soon as the Seigneur de Pierrefonds had come up with the bishop, the Bretons lit the lantern they had brought with them, and Porthos assured his friend that he felt quite as strong as usual.

"Then let us go to the canoe and find out what it contains."

"Do not bring the light too close to it, monseigneur," said Yves, "for in obedience to your directions I placed in the coffer you know of, under the bench of the poop, the barrel of powder and the musket charges you sent from the fort."

"Very well," answered Aramis.

And taking the lantern in his hand he made a minute inspection of all the parts of the boat, with the precautions of a man who knows there is danger, but does not fear it.

The canoe was long and light, drew little water, had a slender keel, was in short one of the kind of boats that Belle-Isle has always been famous for building—somewhat high on the sides, solid on the water, easily handled, and furnished with planks which in unseasonable weather form a sort of deck often washed by the waves, but always affording shelter to the oarsmen.

In two tightly shut coffers resting under the poop and prow Aramis found bread, biscuit, dried fruit, a flitch of bacon, and a good supply of water in leather bottles, rations sufficient for persons who intended to hug the coast, and could always revictual when it was necessary. The weapons—eight muskets and as many pistols—were in good condition and all loaded. There were additional oars in case of accident, and the boat was furnished also with the little sail known as the *trinquette,* which adds to the swiftness of the craft when the boatmen are rowing, is so useful whenever there is a breeze, and is so light that it is no burden to the bark that carries it.

Aramis scrupulously examined everything and was perfectly satisfied with the result of the inspection.

The three stout Bretons set about putting the rollers under the boat for the purpose of starting it, when the distant barking of dogs was heard, evidently coming from the interior of

the island. Aramis, followed by Porthos, rushed out of the cavern.

The barking which had arrested the three fishermen in their efforts to move the boat, and had hurried Aramis and Porthos outside the cave, was now heard in one lengthening echo from a deep gorge about three miles distant.

"It is a pack of hounds," said Porthos; "the dogs are upon a scent."

"What does it mean? Who can be hunting at such a time?" murmured Aramis.

"And in this direction particularly, for everyone in the neighbourhood must be dreading the arrival of the royalists," continued Porthos.

"It would be prudent for us to return to the grotto," counselled Aramis; "evidently we shall soon know what we have to expect, for the barking and shouting are nearer."

They entered the cavern; but before they had gone a hundred steps in the darkness, a sound like the hoarse sigh of some creature in distress echoed through the vaults; and gasping and terrified, a fox darted like a flash of lightning past the fugitives, leaped over the boat and vanished, leaving behind a pungent odour which floated for a few seconds under the low roof of the grotto.

"The fox!" cried the Bretons, with the joyous surprise felt by hunters on such an occasion.

"There are the dogs, plain enough," said Aramis, who was watching behind a chink between two rocks. "Who are the hunters? Look."

Porthos placed his eye at the crevice, and saw a dozen horsemen at the top of a hillock; they were urging their horses on the track of the dogs, and hallooing as loud as they could.

"The guards!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, my friend, the King's guards."

"Do you say the King's guards, monseigneur?" cried the Bretons, turning pale also.

"And Biscarrat at their head, mounted on my grey horse," continued Aramis.

At that very instant the dogs swept into the grotto like an avalanche, and the depths of the cavern were filled with their deafening howls.

"You understand the situation," added the bishop, with the rapid precision of a born leader; "there are six dogs; they will be stopped by the big stone under which the fox slipped; the opening is too narrow to permit them to go through it; there they must be killed.

The Bretons sprang forward, knives in hand.

A few minutes later there was a lamentable concert of dying groans and howls; then all was still.

"Well done," said Aramis, coldly. "Now for their masters!"

"What are we to do?" asked Porthos.

"Wait till they enter, then conceal ourselves and slay them."

"Slay them?" repeated Porthos.

"There are at least sixteen of them now," said Aramis.

And with a resolute air he took up a musket and placed his hunting-knife between his teeth.

"Yves, Goennec, and his son," he went on, "will pass us the muskets. You, Porthos, will fire at close range. We are certain to bring down eight before the others have any suspicion. Then the five of us must despatch the last eight with our knives."

"And what about poor Biscarrat?" asked Porthos.

Aramis reflected for a moment.

"Biscarrat first of all," he answered coldly. "He knows us."

Despite the divining power which was the most remarkable phase of D'Herblay's character, the upshot of the adventure, being subject to the vicissitudes of events in which chance plays a part, was different from what he had anticipated.

Biscarrat, better mounted than his companions, was the first to arrive at the entrance to the grotto; he saw clearly that both fox and hounds must have been engulfed in it. But, stricken by that superstitious terror with which every gloomy cavern naturally affects the human mind, he halted outside, and waited until his companions should come up with him.

"What is the matter?" asked the young men, all out of breath, and at a loss to account for his inaction.

"Why, we cannot hear the dogs. Both they and the fox must be buried in the cave."

"Wait, wait, I'll go with you," cried one of the guardsmen, just as Biscarrat was about to disappear in the darkness.

"No," answered Biscarrat, "something extraordinary must have happened. We mustn't risk ourselves all at once. If you don't hear from me in ten minutes, come in, and come in all together."

"Just as you like," replied the young men, who, for that matter did not see that the enterprise of Biscarrat was attended with any great danger; "we'll wait for you."

And without dismounting they formed a circle round the grotto.

Biscarrat entered alone, and felt his way through the darkness until he struck against the musket of Porthos.

Brave as the young man was, he could not keep back a cry, which was stifled by a handkerchief Aramis pressed against his mouth.

"M. de Biscarrat," said the latter, in a low voice, "we do not wish to do you any harm, and you must be aware of that, if you have recognised us; but at the first word, the first sigh, the first breath, we shall be compelled to kill you as we have killed your dogs. You would have been already dead had we not respected your youth. We permit you to withdraw on condition that you swear you will not mention what you have seen to your companions."

"Not only do I swear that I will not speak of it, but I swear also to do all I possibly can to hinder my comrades from setting a foot inside this grotto."

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" shouted a number of voices, their cries roaring through the cavern like a whirlwind.

"Answer," said Aramis.

"Here I am!" Biscarrat shouted back.

"Go, we rely on your loyalty," said Aramis.

And he released the young man, who hurried in the direction of the light.

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the voices nearest to him.

Biscarrat sprang towards his friends to stop them, and came up with those of them who had just ventured inside the grotto.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, "gentlemen, for God's sake do not enter!"

"But what is there so appalling in that cavern?" inquired several of his fellow-officers.

Thereupon an officer, much older than the others, who had until now remained behind them and said nothing, advanced.

"Gentlemen," said he, with a calmness that offered a contrast to the excitement of his companions, "there is yonder someone or something which is not the devil, but which at all events, has been powerful enough to silence our dogs. We must learn what that someone or something is."

Biscarrat, repulsed by his friends and unable to follow them, unless he were content to be regarded as a traitor and perjurer by Aramis and Porthos, leaned, his ears strained, his hands still supplicating, against the jagged side of a rock a spot he deemed likely to be exposed to the fire of the musketeers.

As for the guardsmen, they penetrated farther and farther, their shouts growing fainter as they plunged into the remoter recesses of the cavern.

Suddenly there was a discharge of musketry, exploding

under the vaults like the sullen, rumbling sound of a thunder-clap. Two or three balls were flattened on the rock against which Biscarrat was leaning. At the same time groans and howls and curses rose upon the air, and the little band of gentlemen fell back, some pale, some bleeding, all enveloped in a cloud of smoke, which the air outside seemed to be drawing away from the depths of the cave.

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the fleeing soldiers, "you knew there was an ambuscade in the cavern, and you did not warn us."

"Biscarrat! you are the cause of the death of four of us; woe to you Biscarrat!"

"You are the cause of my death, for I am dying," said one of the young men, gathering up his blood in his hand and flinging it in Biscarrat's face; "my blood be on your head!"

And he rolled in agony at his comrade's feet.

Biscarrat, with hair on end and haggard eyes, rushed like one possessed to the entrance crying:

"You are right, death to him who has let his comrades be assassinated! I am a base wretch!"

And throwing away his sword, for he was resolved to die without defending himself, he rushed headlong into the cavern. The rest of the young men sprang after him. There were eleven of them; they too plunged into the gulf.

But they did not go farther than had gone the first; a second discharge stretched five of them on the cold sand, and, as it was impossible to see from whence this murderous thunder proceeded, the others recoiled with a feeling of consternation that can be better imagined than described.

Biscarrat did not fly; he remained seated on a ledge, still safe and sound, and waited.

There were but six gentlemen left.

"Seriously," said one of the survivors, "do you believe it is the devil?"

"*Ma foi!* something far worse," was the answer.

"Let us ask Biscarrat; he knows."

"Where are you, Biscarrat?"

The young men looked round, and saw that Biscarrat had made no response to the call.

"He is dead!" cried two or three voices.

"No matter," said the officer who had exhibited such composure during the whole affair, "we can do without his assistance now. Look, reinforcements are arriving."

He was right. A company of the guards, outstripped by its officers in the ardour of their chase, and consisting of about seventy-five or eighty men, was advancing, led by their captain

and first lieutenant. The five officers ran to meet their men and, in language the eloquence of which may be easily conceived related their adventure and asked their help.

The captain interrupted them.

"Where are your comrades?" he inquired.

"Dead!"

"But there were sixteen of you."

"Ten are dead, Biscarrat is in the cavern, and there are five of us here."

"Then Biscarrat is a prisoner?"

"No, for he is yonder; look."

In fact, Biscarrat at this moment made his appearance at the entrance of the grotto.

"He is beckoning us to advance," said the officers. "Forward!"

"Forward!" repeated the soldiers.

And they marched to meet Biscarrat.

"Monsieur," said the captain, addressing him, "I have been assured that you know the men who are making such a desperate resistance in that cavern. I summon you, in the King's name, to declare what you know."

"Captain," answered Biscarrat, "a summons is no longer needed. I have been released from my pledge, and I come in the name of these men."

"To tell me they surrender?"

"To tell you they will defend themselves to the death, if you do not grant them terms."

"How many of them are there?"

"Two."

"Two men!" cried the officer, "and they have killed ten officers in two discharges! Impossible, M. de Biscarrat!"

Biscarrat risked a last attempt.

"Monsieur," said he, in an undertone, "take my advice, let us pass on our way. Those two men, those two lions, you are about to attack, will defend themselves to the death. They have already slain ten of our men; they will slay double the number, and at last kill themselves rather than surrender. What shall we gain by fighting them?"

"This much we shall gain, monsieur: the consciousness of not having ordered eighty of the King's guards to retreat before two rebels. Were I to listen to your advice, monsieur, I should be a dishonoured man, and by dishonouring myself I should dishonour the army. Forward, soldiers!"

And he led the way to the opening of the grotto.

"Captain," said Biscarrat, "I ask to be allowed to march at the head of the first platoon."

"As you wish. You can have that honour; it is a present which I make to you."

"Thanks," replied the young officer, with the firmness to be expected from a man of his race.

"Take your sword with you."

"I shall go as I am," answered Biscarrat. "I go to be killed, not to kill."

And taking his place at the head of the first platoon, bareheaded, and with folded arms:

"Forward, gentlemen!" said he.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It is time to pass into the other camp and describe the combatants and the field of battle. When the two discharges had killed ten men Aramis, accustomed to the windings of the cavern, started to inspect the corpses, and counted them one by one; then he ordered the canoe to be rolled up to the huge stone that closed the outlet to freedom. Porthos collected all his strength, took the boat in his arms, and lifted it up while the Bretons pushed along the rollers rapidly. They were now in the third compartment; they were in front of the stone that blocked their egress.

Porthos seized this gigantic stone at its base, and drove his robust shoulder against it with a momentum that made it crack. A cloud of dust fell from the roof with the ashes of ten thousand generations of sea-birds, whose nests clung like cement to the rock. At the third shock the stone trembled; its oscillations continued for about a minute. Porthos, propping himself against the next rock, used his foot as a crowbar, and pushed the block out of the calcareous masses which served it as cramps and hinges. The stone fell, and daylight appeared, rushing into the cavern through the open doorway in all its radiant splendour, and the blue sea was revealed to the eyes of the delighted Bretons. To shove the boat over this barricade was their next task; there were only forty yards now between it and the ocean.

But it was at this very moment that the company of soldiers arrived, was drawn up by the captain, and made ready either for an escalade or an assault.

Aramis dug his hands furiously into his grizzled locks; he invoked the aid of Heaven; he invoked the aid of Hell! Calling Porthos, who was doing more work by his single self than rollers and boatmen together:

"My friend," he whispered, "our enemies have just been reinforced. We must decide at once. Our Bretons will go on rolling the boat down to the sea."

"Very well."

"We two will keep the powder, the balls, and the muskets here."

"But we two can only fire two shots at a time. Your plan is a bad one," said Porthos, simply.

"Find me a better."

"Leave the matter in my hands; I have an idea."

"If that is so and your idea is a good one—but then, your ideas are always good, and I need not be uneasy."

Porthos took his station in the second compartment, which was in absolute darkness.

Aramis stole into the third. The giant held an iron bar weighing fifty pounds in his hand. He handled this lever, which had been employed in rolling the boat, with marvellous ease.

Aramis was occupied with some very mysterious operation in the lighted compartment. An order given in a loud voice reached their ears. It was the last order of the officer in command. Thereupon twenty-five men leaped from the upper rocks in the first compartment of the grotto, and, having taken their ground, opened fire.

Biscarrat, with his hands extended, marched in front, a man who had devoted himself to death.

"Come on!" he shouted, "come on! I see light."

The bar of iron fell straight on the head of Biscarrat, who was dead before he could utter a cry. Then the terrible lever rose and fell ten times in ten seconds and made ten corpses.

The soldiers could see nothing; they heard groans and sighs; they stumbled over dead bodies and over one another; but, so far, they had no conception of the cause of all this. The implacable bar annihilated the first platoon, and there was not a sound to warn the second, which was calmly marching in its footsteps.

But this second platoon was commanded by the captain in person. He had pulled up one of the slender pines growing on the cliff, and, after twisting its resinous branches together, had converted it into a torch. When he reached the compartment in which Porthos, like the exterminating angel, had destroyed all who approached him, the first rank recoiled in consternation. No volley of musketry had answered theirs, and yet their progress was arrested by piles of corpses; they were literally walking in blood.

Porthos was still behind his pillar.

The captain, on beholding this awful carnage through the medium of the trembling light shed on it by the blazing pine, retreated to the pillar behind which Porthos was standing. Then a gigantic hand issued from the shade, and fastened on the captain's throat. A stifled rattle escaped from his lips; he beat the air with his outstretched arms; the torch fell from his hand and was extinguished in blood.

Before a second had elapsed, the captain's body fell beside the extinguished torch, adding one more corpse to the pile of corpses that blocked the way.

All this was accomplished as mysteriously as if it were the result of magic. On hearing the captain's death-rattle, the soldiers who accompanied him had turned round, and seen his extended arms, his eyes starting from their orbits. Then the torch fell, and they were plunged in darkness.

At that moment when Porthos, better accustomed to the darkness than all these men who had come out of the light, was looking around to see whether Aramis would make him any signal, he felt a gentle touch on his arm, and a voice as faint as a breath murmured in his ear:

"Come."

"Oh!" exclaimed Porthos.

"Hush!" replied Aramis, in a whisper.

And amid the noise made by the advance of the third platoon, amid the imprecations of the guards who still lived and the groans of those in the last agony, Aramis and Porthos slipped unperceived along the granite walls of the cavern.

Aramis guided Porthos into the compartment next the one at the end, and pointed to a barrel of gunpowder in a corner, weighing between sixty and eighty pounds, to which he had just tied a match.

"My friend," said he, "you will take this barrel when I have lit the match, and hurl it among our enemies. But are you able to do so?"

"Well, I should think so!" replied Porthos. And he raised the little cask with one of his hands. "Light the match," he added.

"Wait till they're all close together," said Aramis, "and then, my Jupiter, launch your thunderbolt among them."

"Light it," repeated Porthos.

"I will join our Bretons and help them to get the boat to sea. I will wait for you on the shore. Throw it resolutely, and then hurry up to us."

"Light it," said Porthos for the last time.

Aramis gave the burning touchwood to Porthos, who, as his hand was engaged, offered him his arm. Aramis shook the

arm of Porthos with both his hands, and then made for the outlet where the three fishermen were waiting for him.

When Porthos was alone he bravely applied the tinder to the match. The tinder—but a tiny spark, yet capable of causing such a conflagration—shone in the dark like a firefly, then touched the match, and the light it created was soon blown into a strong flame by the vigorous breathing of Porthos. Then the arm of the giant swung round, and a line of flame passed, like a falling star, through the air. The barrel, hurled a distance of thirty feet, cleared the barricade of corpses, and fell among a group of soldiers who, with a shriek, threw themselves flat on the ground.

The officer had followed the slender trail of light through the air. He leaped forward to tear the match from the barrel before it could reach the contents.

Useless sacrifice! The air had fanned the flame attached to the conductor. The match, which, if left to itself, might have burned for five minutes, was consumed in thirty seconds, and the infernal agent of destruction exploded.

Furious whirlwinds, hissing of sulphur and nitre, the blasting devastation of all-consuming fire, the appalling thunders of an explosion, were all present in that cavern, now as horrible as a cavern in hell. Rocks split like planks of deal beneath the axe. A jet of fire and smoke and fragments of stone spouted up from the centre of the grotto, widening as it ascended. The huge walls of silex tottered and fell upon the sand, and the sand itself, now hurled upward from its hard bed, was turned into an instrument of torture, riddling the face with its myriads of cutting atoms.

Cries, howls, curses, life itself, were all extinguished in one immense crash; the first three compartments became a gulf into which sank, according to its weight, the wreckage vegetable, mineral, or human. Then the lighter sand and ashes fell in turn, spreading out like a greyish pall, and smoking over the dismal graves.

One solitary man has turned all this into a chaos more confused, shapeless, and terrible than that which existed before God had determined to create the world.

Of the three first compartments nothing was left, nothing which even God could have recognised as his handiwork.

After launching the barrel of gunpowder into the midst of his enemies, Porthos, in obedience to the directions of Aramis, had fled, and had reached the last compartment, into which air, light, and sunshine penetrated through the opening.

Therefore, he had no sooner turned the corner that separated the third compartment from the fourth than he saw the boat

dancing on the waves within a hundred paces of him. There were his friends; there was liberty; there was life after victory.

Just six of his long strides and he would be outside the vault; two or three vigorous spurts beyond the vault, and he would be at the boat.

Suddenly he felt his knees bending under him; they seemed powerless, and his legs, too, felt paralysed.

Aramis perceived him through the opening, and was wondering why he delayed.

"Come on, Porthos!" he cried; "come on!"

"Oh!" replied Porthos, straining his whole body in a useless effort, "I am not able."

And he fell upon his knees; but with his mighty hands he clung to a rock and raised himself up again.

"Quick! quick!" shouted Aramis, bending towards the shore, as if he would draw Porthos into his arms.

"In a moment," stammered Porthos, gathering all his strength for another step.

"In God's name, Porthos, come away at once! The barrel will explode in a second!"

"Come away, monseigneur!" cried the Bretons to Porthos.

But there was no longer time; there was a deafening roar, the ground yawned, the smoke that sprang up through the broad fissures hid the sky, the sea hurried away from the shore, as if chased by the breath of flame spouting from the grotto as from the jaws of some gigantic chimera; the tide carried the bark a distance of some forty yards from the beach, and all the rocks were shattered to their base, rent asunder as easily as blocks are under the hammer. A portion of the vault was carried up to the heavens, drawn thither as it were by invisible cables. The green and rose-coloured flames of the sulphur, and the black lava of the argillaceous liquefactions wrestled together and fought for a moment under the majestic dome of smoke. Then long ridges of rock, which the violence of the explosion had not been able to uproot from their primeval pedestals, were seen to oscillate for one instant, lean over, and fall in succession; they seemed to bow to one another slowly like grave old men before stretching themselves for ever in their dusty tombs.

This appalling eruption apparently restored to Porthos the strength he had lost. He stood on his feet, a giant among these giants. But just as he was making his way between the double row of granite phantoms, the latter, no longer buttressed by their corresponding supports, came down crashing around this Titan, who looked as if he had been hurled down from Heaven among the rocks he had just launched against it.

Porthos felt the trembling of the soil beneath his feet, shaken as it was by this protracted convulsion. He spread out his vast hands to the right and left to repel the sinking rocks. A gigantic block on each side of him was kept back by these extended palms; but he bent his head, and another mass of granite fell between his shoulders.

For a moment the arms of Porthos had given way. Then this Hercules collected all his strength, and the two walls of the prison in which he was buried were slowly driven back and gave him room. For an instant he stood in this frame of granite like the ancient angel of chaos. But in repelling the lateral rocks he had removed his point of support from the monolith lying on his shoulders, and pressing him down now with all its weight, it forced the giant to his knees. The lateral rocks, driven back for a time, again approached and added their tons to a weight that of itself would have sufficed to crush half a score of men.

The giant fell without raising a cry for help; he fell while answering Aramis with words of encouragement and cheer; for, thanks to those powerful buttresses, his hands, he might hope, like another Enceladus, to shake off this triple load. But Aramis soon perceived that the block was sinking, perceived that the hands and arms, braced for a last effort, were giving way, perceived that the squared shoulders, now wounded and torn, were disabled, and that the rock was slowly sinking down.

"Porthos! Porthos!" cried Aramis, tearing his hair; "Porthos, where are you? Speak!"

"Here! here!" murmured Porthos, in a dying voice; "patience! patience!"

No sooner had he uttered these words than the momentum of the fall increased the weight; the enormous rock fell, weighed down by the two lateral rocks, which fell on top of it, and Porthos was buried in a sepulchre of broken stones.

On hearing the dying voice of his friend, Aramis had leaped on shore. Two of the Bretons followed him—one staying behind to watch the boat—each with a lever in his hand. The last groans of the valiant athlete guided them to the part of the ruin where he lay.

Aramis, now as animated and vigorous as a youth of twenty, sprang towards the triple mass, and, with those hands of his that were as dainty as a woman's raised, by a miracle of energy, a corner of the immense granite tomb. Then through the sepulchral darkness he caught a glimpse of his friend's eyes, which were shining, the lifting of the mass above him having enabled him to breathe for a moment. Immediately the two Bretons hurried up, grasped tightly their iron levers,

and united their triple strength, not only to raise that mass, but to keep it raised. All their efforts were vain. The three men had to give way slowly, with cries of grief, and the rough voice of Porthos, who perceived they were exhausting themselves in a useless struggle, murmured in a tone of banter, the last words that came to his lips with his last breath.

"Too heavy for you!"

Then the eye darkened and closed, the face grew white, the hands livid, and the Titan fell back, heaving his last sigh. With him sank the rock, which even in his agony he had upheld until now.

The three men dropped their levers, which rolled over the sepulchral stones.

Pale and breathless, his brow bathed with perspiration, Aramis listened for a sound, with an agony that was heart-breaking.

Nothing! The giant was sleeping his eternal sleep in the tomb which God had made to his measure.

Aramis, shivering and trembling like a timorous child, arose silent and shuddering from that stone. A Christian does not walk upon graves. But though he was able to keep on his feet, he could not walk. It looked as if something of the dead Porthos had just died in him.

His Bretons surrounded him; Aramis yielded to their affectionate importunities, and the three sailors, taking him up in their arms, bore him to the canoe. Then, laying him on a bench near the rudder, they bent to their oars, preferring to row rather than hoist a sail, which might betray them.

Only a single mound now rose above the flattened shore and levelled surface of the Locmaria to attract the eye, and from that mound Aramis could not withdraw his gaze, and, away out in the offing, in proportion as he receded from land, that menacing and proud rock seemed to him to draw itself up as lately Porthos did, and to lift to heaven a form as smiling and invincible as that of his honest and valiant friend, the strongest of the four, and yet the first to die.

Singular destiny of these men of bronze! the most guileless of human beings allied to the craftiest; bodily strength swayed by subtlety of mind! And, at the critical moment, when vigour alone could save both mind and body, a stone, a rock, a vile material object, triumphed over strength, and, shattering the body, drove out the mind.

Aramis, still pale, shivering and heart-broken, stared at the shore, until, with the last ray of daylight, it faded on the horizon. Not a word escaped his lips, not a sigh arose from the depths of his breast. The superstitious Bretons stared at

him in silence. This stillness was not human, it was statue-like.

Meanwhile, as soon as the first grey shades dimmed the brightness of the sky, the boat hoisted its little sail, which, swelling out to meet the kisses of the breeze, and scudding away rapidly from the coast, headed bravely for Spain, forcing its way through that terrible Gulf of Gascony, so prolific of tempests.

However, half an hour after the running up of the sail, the sailors took a rest, and, reclining on their benches, showed to one another a white point, seemingly as motionless on the horizon as is, to all appearance, a seagull, rocked by the insensible respiration of the billows. But that which to ordinary eyes would have seemed motionless, to the trained eyes of the sailors was moving rapidly, and that which seemed stationary on the waves was really skimming them.

For some time, witnessing the profound lethargy in which their master was sunk, they did not venture to rouse him, and were satisfied with an interchange of conjectures in a low anxious voice. Aramis, always so vigilant and active; Aramis, whose eye, like the lynx's, was ever on the watch, and saw better by night than by day; Aramis had, in fact, fallen into a state of torpid and apathetic despair.

An hour passed thus, during which daylight gradually disappeared, but during which the vessel in sight gained so swiftly on the boat that Goennec, one of the fishermen, ventured to say aloud:

"Monseigneur, we are pursued!"

Aramis answered with a shrug of the shoulders.

The vessel was still about a league distant; a slight cloud of smoke could be discerned under the sails bluer than the sails themselves, and expanding like an opening flower. Then, at nearly a mile from the little canoe, a ball was seen cutting through the crests of a couple of waves, digging a white furrow in the sea, and vanishing at the end of it as inoffensive, so far, as the stone with which a child makes ducks and drakes in a pond. But it was both a menace and a warning.

"What should we do?" asked Yves.

"They will sink us," said Goennec; "give us absolution, monseigneur."

"But perhaps," urged the skipper, "as it is near nightfall, we may escape them."

"Oh," answered Aramis, "they are sure to have Greek fire, and can light up our path as well as their own."

And as if to give an answer to the suggestion of Aramis, a second cloud of smoke slowly mounted the sky, and from its

bosom spurted a fiery arrow which described a parabola resembling a rainbow, and then fell into the sea, where it continued to burn, illuminating a space of a quarter of a league in diameter.

The Bretons stared at one another in dismay.

"You must now see clearly," said Aramis, "that it is better to wait for them to come up."

The boatmen at once dropped their oars, and the little craft stood still, swinging backward and forward on the crest of the waves.

At length the vessel came within musket-range of the canoe.

"Surrender!" cried the captain through his speaking-trumpet.

The fishermen looked at Aramis.

Aramis made a sign to them with his head.

Yves immediately waved a white flag tied to a gaff.

"At the first sign of resistance, fire!" cried the captain. And turning to the Bretons, he said:

"The life of every one is safe, my friends, except the Chevalier d'Herblay's."

"You have heard, monseigneur?" asked the boatman.

"Accept."

"But what about yourself, monseigneur?"

Aramis leaned over the boat and played with the tips of his white and slender fingers on the greenish water of the sea, gazing at it as he might have gazed at the face of a friend.

"Accept," he repeated.

"We accept," cried the boatmen; "but what security shall we have?"

"The word of a gentleman. I swear by my rank and by my name that the lives of all except M. d'Herblay shall be spared. I am lieutenant of his Majesty's frigate *La Pomone*, and my name is Louis Constant de Presigny."

Suddenly Aramis, whose body was already half out of the boat, drew himself up to his full height, and his eyes flashing, his lips smiling, said to the sailors:

"Throw down the ladder, gentlemen," in the tone of a person who alone had the right to command them.

He was obeyed.

Then Aramis seized the rope-ladder, and was the first to mount on deck. The crew, who had expected to witness an expression of terror on his countenance, were amazed to see him walk up to their commander with a firm step, look at him earnestly, and make with his hand a mysterious, incomprehensible sign, at the sight of which the officer turned pale, trembled, and bowed his head.

Then, pointing to his cabin on the poop, he stepped aside to allow Aramis to pass before him. The three Bretons who had climbed the latter after the bishop, stared at one another in utter stupefaction. The entire crew looked on in silence.

Five minutes later the commander summoned the second lieutenant and ordered him to alter the vessel's course and steer for Corunna. While the order was being executed, Aramis appeared again on deck, and took a seat near the *bastingage.*

It was now the depth of night, and the moon had not yet appeared; yet Aramis kept his eyes obstinately fixed on the direction in which lay Belle-Isle. Yves then approached the captain, who had returned to his post at the stern, and in tones that were very low and humble he asked:

"What course are we following, captain?"

"We follow whatever course monseigneur pleases," was the answer.

Aramis passed the night leaning against the *bastingage.*

Yves on approaching him the next morning noticed that it must have been a very damp night, for the wood upon which the bishop's head rested was soaked with dew. Who knows! perhaps this dew consisted of the first tears that had ever fallen from the eyes of Aramis!

Worthy Porthos! could you wish a finer epitaph than that?

CHAPTER XXXIV

D'Artagnan was not accustomed to resistance such as he had just experienced. He returned to Nantes profoundly exasperated, went straight to the château, and demanded an audience with the King. M. de Gesvres conducted D'Artagnan to the cabinet in which the King was waiting for his captain, and then took his place behind his colleague in the antechamber.

The King was seated with his back turned to the entrance-door of the cabinet. In front of him was a mirror, a glance at which sufficed, while he was turning over his papers, to show him who entered. He did not move when D'Artagnan came in, but simply spread over his letters and plans the green silk cloth which served to hide his secrets from the inquisitive.

D'Artagnan saw through his game and remained a good way behind him, so that, in a minute or so, the King, who heard nothing, and saw nothing except from the corner of his eye, was forced to ask:

"Is not M. d'Artagnan here?"

"I am here," answered the musketeer, advancing.

"Well, monsieur," said Louis, with his clear eyes upon him, "what have you to say to me?"

"I, Sire?" replied the musketeer, who was watching for the first thrust of his adversary that he might answer it with a good parry; "I? I have nothing to say to your Majesty except that you have had me arrested, and here I am."

The King winced; his answer showed it.

"You see, monsieur, to what your disobedience has forced me."

"My disobedience?" exclaimed D'Artagnan, red with anger.

"It is the mildest term I have been able to find," continued the King. "My resolution was to have certain rebels arrested and punished. Was I bound to inquire whether these rebels were your friends or not?"

"But I was bound to inquire," retorted D'Artagnan. "It was cruel in your Majesty to send me to capture my friends in order that you might hang them on your gibbets."

"M. d'Artagnan, are you aware that such remarks are treasonable? Have the goodness to tell me who is King of France? Do you happen to know of another one?"

"Sire," answered the musketeer, coldly, "I remember a morning when at Vaux you put that very question to many persons who were unable to answer it, but I answered. If I recognised the King on that day, when to do so was not easy, I think it is useless to put the same question to me now, when your Majesty is alone with me."

At these words Louis cast down his eyes. It seemed to him as if the shade of the hapless Philippe had passed between D'Artagnan and him, evoking the memory of that terrible adventure.

Just at this very moment an officer entered and handed a despatch to the King, who changed colour on reading it.

D'Artagnan remarked his pallor. After reading it a second time, the King remained motionless and silent. Then, suddenly coming to a resolution:

"Monsieur," said he, "you will learn the tidings I have just received later on. Better you should learn them now, and from the lips of your King. There has been a combat at Belle-Isle."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, calmly, although his heart was beating as if it would burst through his breast. "Well, Sire?"

"Well, monsieur, I have lost a hundred and six men."

A flash of joy and pride leaped from D'Artagnan's eyes.

"And the rebels?" he asked.

"Have fled," answered the King.

D'Artagnan uttered a cry of triumph.

"But," added the King, "I have a fleet at Belle-Isle, and I am certain no boat can escape."

D'Artagnan brushed away the perspiration that was flowing down his forehead.

"I have told you," continued Louis, "that I would, some day, be to you an affectionate, generous, and constant master. You are to-day the only man of the past that is worthy of my anger or of my friendship. Look around you: see what great heads have bent. Bend like them, or choose the exile that may suit you better. Perhaps, on reflection, you may find out that a king who has such confidence in your loyalty that he allows you to depart, although you are discontented and possess a great state secret, has a generous heart. I know you to be an honest man. Why judge me before the evidence is before you? Judge me from this day forward, D'Artagnan, and be as severe as you like."

For the first time in his life D'Artagnan was dazed, speechless, and wavering. He had met a foeman worthy of him. This was not craft, it was penetration; this was not violence, it was strength; this was no longer anger, it was resolution; this was no longer bravado, it was self-command. This young man, who had overthrown Fouquet and could do without D'Artagnan, entirely unsettled the somewhat stubborn calculations of our musketeer.

"Well, why do you pause?" said the King, affectionately. "You have given me your resignation; do you wish me to accept it? I agree that it will be hard for my old captain to recover from his fit of ill-temper."

"Oh," answered D'Artagnan, sadly, "that is not my most serious trouble. I hesitate to take back my resignation because I am an old man, and it will be hard for me to change my habits. I will remain because, for thirty years, I have been accustomed to receive the watchword from the King and to hear him say, with a smile, 'Good-night, D'Artagnan.' I never begged for that smile. I will beg for it now. Are you satisfied, Sire?"

And D'Artagnan slowly bent his grey head, upon which the King, smiling, proudly laid his white hand.

"Thank you, my old servant and faithful friend," said he. "Since I have no longer enemies in France I must send you to pick up your marshal's baton on a foreign battlefield. You may depend upon it I shall find you the opportunity. Meanwhile, eat of my best bread, and sleep in peace."

"Be it as you wish, Sire," answered D'Artagnan, deeply affected. "But those poor people of Belle-Isle? One of them particularly, who is so kindly and honest?"

"Do you ask me to pardon them?"

"On my knees, Sire."

"Well, carry my pardon to them, if there be still time. But do you answer for them?"

"With my life, Sire."

"Go then. To-morrow I start for Paris. Return speedily, for I do not want you ever to leave me again."

"You need have no uneasiness on that point, Sire," cried D'Artagnan, kissing the hand of the King.

And he rushed out, his heart swelling with joy, and was soon on the road to Belle-Isle.

CHAPTER XXXV

The King had returned to Paris. D'Artagnan, who had in twenty-four hours collected all the information possible at Belle-Isle, was soon with him. Louis, happy in his success and rendered more gentle and affable by his present consciousness of increased power, had just risen and was taking his morning repast, when his captain of musketeers presented himself before him. D'Artagnan was somewhat pale and seemed out of sorts.

The King at the first glance perceived the change in that usually unruffled face.

"Is anything the matter with you, D'Artagnan?" he inquired.

"Sire, a great misfortune has fallen on me."

"*Mon Dieu!* and what is it?"

"I have lost one of my friends; M. du Vallon was killed at Belle-Isle."

And D'Artagnan fastened his eagle eye on Louis XIV., to catch the first feeling that his features might reveal.

"I was aware of it," answered the King.

"You were aware of it and never said a word to me?" cried the musketeer.

"What was the use? Your sorrow, my friend, was worthy of all respect, and I did not wish to add to it. If I had told you of this fresh misfortune you might have thought I wanted to triumph over you. Yes, I know that M. du Vallon was buried under the rocks of Locmaria. I knew that M. d'Herblay had seized one of my vessels and compelled it to carry him to Bayonne. But I desired you should learn of these events in a direct manner, in order to convince you that my friends are sacred in my regard; that as a man I am ready to

sacrifice myself for men, though as a king I may often be forced to sacrifice men to my majesty and power."

"But, Sire, how did you know this?"

"How did you know it yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"By a letter I received from Aramis, now safe and free at Bayonne."

"Wait a moment," said the King, taking a letter from a casket on a table near a chair over which D'Artagnan was leaning. "This letter is an exact copy of yours, and I had it from Colbert a week before you received yours. Don't you think I am pretty well served?"

"Yes, Sire," muttered D'Artagnan, "you are the only man whose fortune could control the fortune and strength of my two friends. You have used your fortune, Sire; you will not abuse it?"

"D'Artagnan," replied the King, with a kindly smile, "I might have had M. d'Herblay carried off from the territory of the King of Spain, and brought here alive to suffer for his crime. My first impulse was a very natural one, but I will not yield to it. He is free and will remain free."

"Oh! Sire, but you will always be so clement, so noble, and generous as you have shown yourself in regard to M. d'Herblay? You will find many counsellors around you who will cure you of that weakness."

"No, D'Artagnan, you are mistaken if you think my advisers have urged me to adopt rigorous measures. It was Colbert who advised me to spare M. d'Herblay."

"Sire!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, in amazement.

"And now to come to yourself," continued the King, with an amiability that was unusual in him. "I have several pieces of good news to announce to you; you will hear them after I have looked over my reports, my dear captain. I told you that I wished to make, and would make, your fortune. Well, my promise is about to be realised."

"A thousand thanks, Sire.

The King smiled, and passed into the next hall. after saying to D'Artagnan:

"I give you the leave of absence you must need to settle the affairs of the late M. du Vallon, your friend."

CHAPTER XXXVI

While these events were separating forever the four musketeers, once united by ties that appeared indissoluble, Athos,

left alone after Raoul's departure, was beginning to pay his tribute to that anticipated death which is called the absence of those we love.

After his return to Blois to a house which no longer held even Grimaud, to receive a piteous smile from him as he walked in his gardens, Athos felt that at that robust constitution of his, once apparently invincible, was growing daily weaker and weaker.

For several days the count did not utter a word. He declined receiving visitors, and during the night he was seen to light the lamp and spend long hours writing or poring over parchments.

A time came when Athos hardly ever slept. By intense thinking he became oblivious to everything for a few hours, fell into a state of reverie more dark and deep than that which others would have called a dream. This momentary repose gave a certain degree of invigoration to the body, which the soul wearied. Athos had a double life during these wanderings of his understanding. One night he dreamed that Raoul was dressing in his tent, preparatory to going on an expedition which M. de Beaufort was to conduct personally. The young man was sad, and was slowly fitting on his cuirass and buckling on his sword.

"What ails you?" his father asked, tenderly.

"The cause of my grief is the death of Porthos, our dear, dear friend," answered Raoul. "I suffer here the same pain that you will feel at home."

And the vision passed away with his slumbers.

At daybreak a servant entered, and handed the count a letter that came from Spain.

"The writing of Aramis," he thought; and he read it.

"Porthos dead!" he cried, after the first lines. "Raoul, Raoul, thanks! thou hast kept thy promise, thou hast warned me!"

After this the situation of Athos became strange and indefinable. Now that he was able to think, his mind turned towards Raoul, that beloved son. His imagination showed him the district of Africa in the neighbourhood of Djidgelli, where Beaufort had landed with his army. Then, while his eyes were wandering over the plain, a white form started up before him behind the resinous myrtles.

This form was clad in an officer's costume; it held in its hand a broken sword; it advanced slowly towards Athos, who suddenly paused and fixed his gaze upon it, and, without speaking or moving, tried to hold out his arms, because in

that pale, silent officer he had immediately recognised Raoul.

He endeavoured to utter a cry; but it was stifled in his throat. With a gesture Raoul motioned him to be still, laying a finger on his lips, and retiring slowly, although Athos did not see his lips move. Then the tender father, whose strength love renewed, made a last effort and climbed the mountain in the steps of the young man, who drew him after him by his gestures and his smiles.

At last he touched the crest of the hill, and saw, outlined in black, the aerial form of his son. Athos stretched out his hand, thinking to reach the beloved object, and Raoul also held out his to his father. But suddenly, as if forced away in spite of himself, the young man quitted the earth, and Athos saw his son beckoning, even beckoning to him to mount along with him to Heaven.

Athos was at this point of his marvellous vision when the charm was suddenly broken by a loud noise that came from behind the outward gates of the mansion.

The galloping of a horse was heard on the hardened sand of the grand avenue, and the sound of voices engaged in a very animated and clamorous conversation reached even to the chamber where the count was dreaming.

Then the door was opened, and Athos, turning a little to the side from which the noise proceeded, said in a feeble voice:

"The courier from Africa, is it not?"

"No, M. le Comte," answered a voice, at the sound of which Raoul's father started up in his bed.

"Grimaud!" he murmured.

And the moisture flowed down his sunken cheeks.

Grimaud bore on his countenance the impress of an anguish that was already old, that had grown familiar to him. He seemed to have at his command but one single version of his thoughts. Once he had made it his habit never to speak; now it had become his habit never to smile.

Athos read all these shades on the face of this faithful servitor, and in the tones he would have adopted in speaking to Raoul during his vision, he said:

"Grimaud, Raoul is dead, is he not?"

Behind Grimaud stood the other servants, with hearts palpitating, with eyes riveted on the sick man's couch. They heard the terrible question; it was followed by an awful silence.

"Yes," answered the old man, tearing the monosyllable from his throat with a hoarse sigh..

Then arose groans, and lamentations, and prayers, and sobs,

that filled the chamber in which the agonised father sought with his eyes the portrait of his son.

All this was for Athos like the transition that had led him to his dream.

Without uttering a cry, without shedding a tear, as mild, patient, and resigned as the martyrs of old, he raised his eyes to heaven as if to behold again, rising above the mountain of Djidgelli, the dear shade, that had vanished from his eye at the moment of Grimaud's arrival.

Doubtless when he looked upward there was a renewal of the marvellous vision, and he passed along the same paths through which that terrible yet sweet vision had once before conducted him, for, after closing his eyes, he opened them again and smiled; he had just seen Raoul and he, too, had smiled on him.

With his hands joined over his breast, with his face turned to the window and bathed by the cool night air which brought to his pillow the perfumes of the flowers and the woods, Athos entered into the contemplation of that Paradise the living may never see, entered never to leave it again.

After an hour of this ecstasy Athos gently raised his milk-white hands; the smile never left his lips, and he murmured, murmured so low that he could hardly be heard, three words addressed to God or to Raoul:

"HERE I AM!"

And his hands fell back slowly as if he were himself resting them on the bed.

Death had come in kindly and benignant guise to this noble being. It had spared him the tortures of the last agony, the convulsions of the last journey; it had opened with a gracious finger the gates of eternity to this illustrious and radiant soul.

Every voice in the house was hushed, every murmur stilled, every one respected the sleep of his seigneur. But Grimaud had listened with such intentness that at length he perceived the count no longer breathed. He raised himself upon his hands, and, without stirring from his place, watched to see if he could not note some movement in his master's body. None! Terror seized him; he rose up to his full height, and at the same moment heard steps on the stairs. The jingling of a spur knocking against a sword, a warlike sound familiar to his ears, accompanied the steps and came to a sudden stop just as he was advancing to the bed of Athos. A voice, more vibrating than even bronze or steel, resounded within three paces of him.

"Athos! Athos my friend!" cried this voice, trembling with unshed tears.

"M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan," stammered Grimaud.

"Where is he?" asked the musketeer.

Grimaud clutched his arm with his bony fingers, and pointed to the bed upon the sheets of which the livid tints of the dead body could be already seen.

.

At daybreak D'Artagnan, who had been wandering through the lower hall, biting his fists to stifle his sighs, went upstairs for the second time, and, making a sign to Grimaud, when the old man's head was turned in his direction, beckoned to him to come with him. The faithful servitor obeyed without making more noise than a shadow.

D'Artagnan went downstairs, followed by Grimaud. Once in the vestibule, he said:

"Grimaud, I have seen how the father died, tell me how died the son."

Grimaud drew from his breast a letter addressed to Athos; D'Artagnan recognised the writing of M. de Beaufort.

The letter, intended for the living, only reached the dead. God had changed the address.

> "*My dear count,*" wrote the prince, in his big, clumsy, schoolboy handwriting, "*we have met with a great misfortune in the middle of a great triumph. The King has lost one of his bravest soldiers. I have lost a friend. You have lost M. de Bragelonne.*
>
> "*He died gloriously, so gloriously that I have not the strength to weep over him as much as I should wish.*
>
> "*Receive my sad compliments, my dear count. Heaven sends us trials to match the greatness of our hearts. This one is terrible, but not above your courage.*
>
> "*Your good friend,*
>
> "*Le Duc de Beaufort.*"

This letter enclosed a narrative written by one of the prince's secretaries. D'Artagnan stopped at the account of poor Raoul's death.

"The unhappy boy!" he murmured, and turning his eyes in the direction of the chamber where Athos was sleeping his eternal sleep:

"They kept their word to each other," he whispered to himself. "Surely they are now happy, they are reunited."

CHAPTER XXXVII

Four years after the scenes we have just described, two well-mounted cavaliers passed through Blois at daybreak for the purpose of arranging a falcon party the King desired to have in that broken plain which the Loire cuts in two, and which borders on Meung on one side and on Amboise on the other.

They were the captains of the royal greyhounds and falcons, highly respected personages in the days of Louis XIII., but not so highly thought of by his successor.

These two cavaliers were returning, after reconnoitring the ground and making their observations, when they noticed little scattered bands of soldiers, who were being stationed by their sergeants at regular distances before the openings of the enclosures. The soldiers belonged to the King's musketeers.

Behind them on a noble charger rode their captain, easily recognisable by his gold embroideries. He had grey hair, and his beard was getting grey also. He seemed a little bent, although he managed his horse with ease, and looked around him with an eye as watchful as ever.

D'Artagnan approached the two officers with that pleasant but distinctive affability which marks superior men. In exchange for his courtesy he was greeted with two bows full of respect.

"The long journey you have just made has not wearied you, M. le Capitaine?" asked the falconer. "It is two hundred leagues from here to Pignerol, I think, isn't it?"

"Two hundred and sixty going, and the same returning," replied D'Artagnan, quietly.

"And," inquired the falconer, in an undertone, "is *he* well?"

"Who?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Poor M. Fouquet," explained the falconer, in the same low voice.

"No," answered D'Artagnan, "the poor man is in deep affliction. He does not regard imprisonment as a favour, says parliament acquitted him when it banished him, and that banishment is freedom. It never seems to occur to him that his death was decided on, and that he ought to thank God for saving him from the claws of the parliament."

The winding of the horn interrupted the conversation. The King appeared in the distance, surrounded by ladies and cavaliers. All the company were advancing in beautiful order, at a foot's pace, while the horns and trumpets animated the dogs and horses.

A woman of the most magnificent beauty rode on the left of the King, mounted on a fiery steed which she managed with the greatest skill. The King smiled on her, and she smiled back at the King.

"I should know that woman," thought the musketeer; "who is she, I wonder?"

He rode up to his friend the falconer and asked him. But before D'Artagnan could get an answer the King perceived him.

"Ah, count," said he, "so you are back. How is it I have not seen you?"

"Sire," replied the captain, "because your Majesty was asleep when I arrived, and you were not awake when I went on duty this morning."

"Ever the same," said Louis, aloud, unable to hide his satisfaction. "Go and have some rest; I order you to do so, count. You will dine with me to-day."

The murmurs of admiration that arose around D'Artagnan enfolded him as it were in one immense caress. He was congratulated on all sides. An invitation to dinner was an honour to which his Majesty was not so lavish as Henri IV. had been. The King passed on, and D'Artagnan found himself brought to a stand by a new group, in the centre of which shone Colbert. "Good-day, M. d'Artagnan," said the minister, affably. "Stay, let us allow the carriage of poor La Vallière to pass by. Do you notice how anxious she looks? How her tearful eyes follow the King, who is yonder on horseback!"

"With whom?"

"With Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, now Madame de Montespan," replied Colbert.

"She is jealous; has she been abandoned, then?"

"Not yet, but she soon will be."

That evening D'Artagnan was seated at the King's table with M. Colbert.

The King was very gay. He paid numberless polite attentions to the Queen, as well as to Madame, who was seated on his left and looking very sad. The manner of Louis recalled those untroubled days when he used to watch his mother's eyes for her approval or her censure of whatever he had happened to say.

There was no hint as to the existence of mistresses at this dinner. On rising from the table the King offered his hand to the Queen and made a sign to Colbert, whose eye was watching his master's.

Colbert took D'Artagnan aside.

"M. d'Artagnan," resumed Colbert, "I fancy, between ourselves, you would have no objection to leading your musketeers into Holland. Do you know how to swim?"

And he burst out laughing, like a man who is in a very gay humour indeed.

"Like a fish," answered D'Artagnan.

"Ah! but there are some ugly spots to be crossed in the canals and marshes over there, M. d'Artagnan, and the best swimmers get drowned."

"Well?"

"Well, no one can be drowned, if he have a boat, a plank, or even a stick."

"Even though the stick be as short as a baton?" said D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," returned Colbert. "I never yet heard of a French marshal who was drowned."

D'Artagnan turned pale with joy, and replied in a voice that faltered:

"They would be very proud of me at home in my native place if they heard I was a marshal of France. But it is necessary to be the commander-in-chief of an expedition in order to obtain the baton."

"Monsieur," said Colbert, "there is in this notebook, which you will please study, a plan of campaign to be followed by the different corps that the King will place under your orders next spring."

D'Artagnan took the book with a trembling hand, which he minister grasped loyally.

"Monsieur," said Colbert, "we have both a revenge to exact from each other. I have had mine; it is now for you to have yours."

"I shall make you a full return, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan; "and be good enough to tell the King that, upon the first occasion that may be offered, he will hear of a victory or hear of my death."

"Then I will have the golden fleur-de-lis affixed to your marshal's baton immediately," said Colbert.

As Colbert had predicted, the army entered on its campaign in spring. It preceded, in magnificent order, the court of Louis XIV, who rode at the head of the flower of his kingdom to this bloody festival, surrounded by carriages full of ladies and courtiers.

The officers of the army had, it is true, no music except the booming of the artillery from the Dutch forts. But it

contented a very large number, who found in this war honours, advancement, fortune, or death.

D'Artagnan commanded a body of twelve thousand men, cavalry and infantry, with which he was ordered to take the different strong places which form the knots of that strategic network called Friesland. Never had an army been conducted more gallantly on an expedition. The officers knew that their leader, as prudent and astute as he was brave, would not sacrifice a man or an inch of ground without necessity. He followed the old customs of war, namely, living on the country, keeping the soldiers singing and the enemy weeping. The captain of the King's musketeers displayed a certain coquetry in showing that he knew his trade. Never were opportunities better chosen, surprises better seconded, faults of the beleaguered turned to better account. D'Artagnan's army took twelve small fortresses in a month.

He was now before the thirteenth, which had been holding out for five days. D'Artagnan had the trenches opened. Even his pioneers and labourers were full of emulation, ideas and zeal, because he treated them like soldiers, knew how to make their task seem glorious to them, and never let them be killed except when he could not help it. So it was worth while seeing the fury with which they turned up the marshy soil of Holland. These mud-banks and heavy clays melted, as the soldiers used to say, like the butter in the vast frying-pans of the Friesland housewives.

D'Artagnan sent a courier to the King with despatches relating his last successes; this increased his Majesty's good humour and his inclination to amuse the ladies. These victories gave such majesty to the prince that Madame de Montespan never addressed him now but as Louis the Invincible. Consequently Mademoiselle de la Vallière, who called him only Louis the Victorious, lost much of his Majesty's favour. Besides, her eyes were often red, and nothing disgusts an Invincible so much as a weeping mistress, especially when all around the Invincible are smiling. The star of Mademoiselle de la Vallière was sinking below the horizon in clouds and tears. But the gaiety of Madame de Montespan grew brighter with every fresh success, and consoled the monarch for every other unpleasantness, and all this was due to D'Artagnan.

His Majesty wished to recognise such services. He wrote to M. Colbert:

"M. COLBERT: *We have a promise to keep with M.*

d'Artagnan, who is keeping his. I wish to inform you that the hour has come to fulfil it. You shall be furnished with all due provisions for the purpose at the proper time.

"LOUIS."

Colbert, then, who had D'Artagnan's messenger with him, handed this officer a letter and a little ebony box inlaid with gold, not very heavy in appearance, but doubtless very heavy in reality, since the messenger was given a guard of five men to enable him to carry it. M. Colbert's messenger had orders to seek M. d'Artagnan wherever he might be, and at whatever hour of the day or night. He made his way, then, to the trenches, followed by his escort, all on horseback.

It was easy to distinguish D'Artagnan in the open plain, with his gold-laced hat and his long cane. He was biting his white moustache and brushing off from his tunic, with his left hand, the dust thrown up by the balls that ploughed the soil around him.

Just at the moment when the triumphant general was having time to breathe, he heard a voice at his side, which said:

"On the part of M. Colbert, if you please, monsieur."

He broke the seal of a letter containing these words:

"M. D'ARTAGNAN: *The King charges me to inform you that he has named you Marshal of France, in reward of the good service and the honour you have done his arms.*

"*The King is delighted, monsieur, with the captures you have made already; he commands you especially to finish the siege you have begun, with good fortune for yourself and success for him.*"

D'Artagnan was standing, his face heated, his eyes sparkling. He looked up to see the progress made by his troops on the walls, which were still enveloped in volumes of red and black smoke.

"It is nearly all over," said he to the messenger. "The town will surrender in a quarter of an hour."

He continued his reading:

"*The casket, M. d'Artagnan, is my own gift. You will not be sorry to observe that, while your warriors draw their swords to defend the King, I am giving life to those peaceful arts that are destined to adorn the rewards worthy of you.*

"*I recommend myself to your friendship, M. le Marechal, and beg you to believe in mine.*

"*COLBERT.*"

Intoxicated with joy, D'Artagnan beckoned to the messenger, who approached with the casket in his hands. But at the very moment the marshal was about to examine it, a powerful explosion resounded on the ramparts and drew his attention to the quarter in which it occurred.

"It is strange," he said, "that I do not see the royal flag on the walls or hear the drums beating the summons to parley."

He launched three hundred fresh men under one of his most dashing officers, and ordered another breach to be effected. Then, feeling somewhat more at his ease, he turned his attention to the casket which Colbert's messenger was holding out to him. It was his property; he had won it.

D'Artagnan was holding out his hand to open the casket, when a ball from the city crushed it in the arms of the officer, struck D'Artagnan full in the chest, and knocked him down upon a sloping heap of earth, whilst the fleur-de-lised baton, escaping from the broken sides of the box, came rolling under the powerless hand of the marshal.

A terrible cry broke from the group of his dismayed officers: the marshal was covered with blood; the paleness of death ascended slowly to his noble countenance. Leaning upon the arms which were held out on all sides to receive him, he was able once more to turn his eyes towards the place, and to distinguish the white flag at the crest of the principal bastion. His ears, already deaf to the sounds of life, caught feebly the rolling of the drum which announced the victory. Then, clasping in his nervous hand the baton, ornamented with its fleur-de-lis, he cast down upon it his eyes, which had no longer the power of looking upwards towards heaven, and fell back murmuring strange words, which appeared to the soldiers cabalistic words—words which had formerly represented so many things on earth, and which none but the dying man longer comprehended:

"Athos—Porthos, farewell till we meet again! Aramis, adieu for ever!"

Of the four valiant men whose history has been related, there now no longer remained but one single body. God had resumed the souls.

THE END

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